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FREDERICK E. SMITH

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starring Tony Curtis and Roger Moore

With the two men evenly matched, the fight that followed was hard and brutal. After exchanging punches for a minute or more Brett picked up a scaffolding pole and swung it viciously. Leaping aside, Danny managed to grab hold of it as Brett tried a second scything blow. Staggering, gasping for breath, the two men reeled and stumbled over the piles of building materials. Danny had to keep leaping back as Brett's feet lashed out at him. Yanking desperately on the pole he managed to draw the Englishman off balance. Risking everything, he released the pole, jumped in, and unleashed a punch that travelled no more than eight inches. It caught Brett too high on the jaw for a knockout but sent him crashing heavily among a pile of broken bricks. As he struck them Danny heard a groan of pain and saw Brett's left forearm, from which the sleeve had been torn, was severely abrased by a fractured brick. "All right," he gasped. "That's enough or we're going to kill one another. Let's go somewhere and sort this out"

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Frederick E. Smith

Based on screenplays by

Brian Clemens and Milt Gelman

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

An Intext Publisher

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SBN 345-02633-0-095

This edition published by arrangement with
Pan Books Ltd.

First Printing: March, 1972

Printed in the United States of America

BALLANTINE BOOKS, INC.
101 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10003

FIVE MILES TO MIDNIGHT

Based on the screenplay
by Terry Nation

CHAPTER I

The Rome suburb, full of large houses, wealth and respectability, lay quiet in the bright moonlight. The ghosdy light filtered through stately trees and lay white on the wide roads. In the distance a cathedral clock struck 2 am. Traffic in the city centre, like the sound of far-ofi machinery, only added to the stillness.

It was 2.25 when the peace of the suburb was disturbed by the entry of a police car. Its siren was silent but its roof light was flashing urgently. It turned into a tree-lined road, travelled at speed for three hundred yards, then pulled up sharply near a road intersection.

A large apartment block stood at one corner of the intersection. Gracious and elegant, it was built in the best traditions of Italian architecture, with a vaulted archway leading into a spacious inner courtyard.

Two uniformed policemen, followed by two men in plain clothes, jumped from the car and made for the archway. Their hurried movements suggested an emergency. As they disappeared through the archway a large white Mercedes pulled unobtrusively from a side street and parked beneath a tree on the opposite side of the road. A door opened and closed, but a close observer would have seen that no one left the car.

The four policemen made their way up into the apartment block by the staircase. Each level was served by a colonnaded arcade and the footsteps of the hurrying men sounded loud on the marble pavings. Here and there, tense men and women in their night attire stood in apartment doorways and watched them pass. There was little conversation and that was muted. The enure block seemed contained in an atmosphere of shock.

Movement showed at last in the car across the road. The driver left his seat and opened the rear door. The filtered moonlight showed a man inside peering through a telescopic sight at one of the upper apartment windows. The man, Torino, was impeccably dressed in a dark, executive-type suit. Everything about Torino, his manner, his appearance, his soft voice, was undemonstrative

to the point of efface-ment. Yet to those who served his criminal organization, his authority was all compelling.

A flat case lay open on the seat alongside him. Inside it was a marksman's rifle with its detachable stock and barrel neatly bedded down. Pulling out a handkerchief, Torino fastidiously wiped a speck of dust from the lens of the telescopic sight before returning it to the case. Closing the case, he handed it to the waiting man. 'Try not to be too long,' he said quietly in Italian.

The man who nodded, Manetti, was tall, with a long face and sunken cheeks. The moonlight made him appear a cadaverous figure as he crossed the road, although with the flat case in his hand his movements were as innocuous as those of a solicitor calling on a client. Torino's dark eyes watched him unemotionally until he vanished beneath the archway. Then, with a slight sigh, he settled back comfortably in the luxurious Mercedes. Torino was a man of infinite patience.

By this time the police had reached the third floor of the palatial apartments and were gathered outside a panelled door. The senior of the two plain clothes men, Brusati, was in charge. In his middle forties, weary-looking with thinning hair, he gave the impression of a man whose conscientiousness had made him old before his time. Ordering one of the policemen to stand guard outside, he tapped on the apartment door and entered.

The three men found themselves in a small lobby. The furniture was expensive and rare, but the outstanding feature of the small room was its freshly cut flowers. They stood in vases on tables, windowledges, and in large jars on the marble floor. A telephone rested on a small marble table.

Brusati saw the door opposite was slightly ajar. Nodding at his two assistants, he pushed it open. The room he gazed into was in darkness. On the left, in front of a window that overlooked the inner courtyard, curtains billowed out in the night breeze. Brusati turned to his second-in-command, the other plain clothes detective. 'It's cold in here. Close that window.'

Vasile, a younger man with obvious enthusiasm for his work, showed a deference to Brusati that said much for the older man's character.

'Si, padrone.'

As Vasile moved towards the window, Brusati switched on an ornate table lamp. Its heavy shade left much of the room in shadow but the three men could see it was sumptuously furnished with an abundance of marble, cut glass, and like the lobby, huge vases of fresh flowers.

Brusati's eyes fixed on a modern swivel chair that stood ten feet or so from the courtyard window. Although its high back faced him, a drifting spiral of smoke told him it was occupied. Reaching out a hand he spun it gently round.

A woman wearing a lacy negligee swung into view. She was beautiful with the colouring of a southern Latin. Her figure was shapely and her slender legs were tucked beneath her. The effect made her appear small in the huge chair. She showed no surprise at the men's entry: on the contrary her expression was unemotional, even resigned. After a disinterested glance at Brusati, her eyes

moved to the cigarette in her hand which had gathered a long length of ash. Her voice as she glanced at the uniformed poUceman was peremptory. 'An ashtray, please.'

Before the poUceman could move, Brusati picked up an ashtray from an occasional table and handed it to her. She took it without thanks and rested it on her lap. Behind Brusati, Vasile had now closed the window. The curtains, protected from the night breeze, fell back into place, leaving a couple of feet of the window uncovered.

Like Brusati, Vasile was watching the woman. After tapping off the length of ash, she occupied herself for a moment by rubbing the lighted end of the cigarette around the ashtray. Then, without looking up, she nodded her head. 'Over there.'

All three men turned towards a low couch at the far side of the lounge. Followed by VasUe, Brusati crossed the room and leaned over it. The prostrate figure of a man lay face downwards on the beige pUe carpet. Vasile leaned down and turned the body over. He glanced up at Brusati who was showing no emotion. ‘ Know him, padrone?' Brusati nodded. 'Gino Franco.'

The name made Vasile react sharply. *'The* Gino Franco?' Brusati gave his weary frown. 'Don't make him sound like a celebrity. He was only a gangster.'

‘But surely an important one, padrone?' *'Was* important,' Brusati said, turning away. 'CaU the morgue.'

As Vasile went into the lobby, Brusati approached the woman. She had taken a red carnation from a nearby vase and was occupying herself by plucking off the petals. Her eyes did not lift at Brusati's question.

Tour name, signora?'

'Nicole. Nicole Franco.'

Brusati's voice was gentle. By nature he was a gentle man. Then he was your husband?'

Nicole nodded and continued plucking at the red petals. *1* was here with a man. Gino came and found us. He didn't have a gun. My friend did.' Her shrug told the rest,

This friend, signora. His name?'

Nicole's voice turned bitter. 'What does it matter? Gino's associates take revenge very seriously. Your job will be done for you. They will find my friend and they will kill him.' Plucking off the remaining petals, she crushed them in her hand. 'Just like that.'

"His name, signora?' Brusati asked patiently.

Ignoring him, Nicole let some of the crushed petals trickle from her hand to the carpet. "They also punish unfaithful wives. Have you ever spoken to a dead woman before?'

1 can give you protection,' Brusati said.

He could not decide whether her resigned smile was one of appreciation or pity. 'Perhaps you should know. It will help you identify his body when you find him. It is Rocco, Frank Rocco.'

Brusati's expression told he knew the name well. Leaving Nicole still playing with the petals he went to the lobby and closed the door behind him.

1 want a general alert put out for Frank Rocco, an American citizen resident in Rome,' he told Vasile. 'Check with the Aliens Bureau and with Records - see what they have. Then get on to ...'

A crash of glass from the lounge made him pause in mid-sentence. Then, reacting sharply, he flung the lounge door open.

The room looked as he had left it except that Nicole's swivel chair was rotating again. Then he saw the uniformed man's transfixed face and his eyes moved to the window. The window curtains were stirring slightly again as if one casement had come ajar. Running forward, Brusati gave a violent start. A small hole, with a tracery of cracks stemming out from it, disfigured one pane of glass.

He spun round. The swivelling chair was now bringing the slumped figure of Nicole into his sight. His shocked eyes moved down to her hand, now dangling limply alongside the chair. Petals, fluttering from it, were making a red arc on the deep pile carpet.

The police car stood broadside across the wide, tree-lined road. A couple of motor cycles stood nearby. A policeman was questioning the driver of a Fiat who was trying to enter the cordoned-off area. Four other policemen, all heavily armed, stood in a group on the road. The morning sun was warm and one of them was dabbing his face with a handkerchief.

A luxurious Aston-Martin DBSV8 came out of an intersection and approached the road block at speed. Its nose dipped as one of the four policemen stepped forward and held up his hand. The driver, a tall, good-looking man with brown hair and broad shoulders, leaned his tanned face through the window. He addressed the policeman in fluent Italian.

'Buon giorno, Agentel What's the problem?'

The policeman ran his eyes over the driver's expensive linen suit and decided a salute was appropriate. There has been some trouble, signore, and the district has been sealed off since the early hours of this morning. May I see your passport or your green card?'

The driver gave a shrug and reached into the glove compartment. The policeman opened the passport and gave a slight start, Tou are an English aristocrat, signore?'

Brett Sinclair, ex-playboy of a hundred jet-set resorts, gave his famous quizzical smile. 'I hope it's not going to count against me?'

The policeman, a cautious man with little sense of humour, handed the passport back deferentially. 'My apologies, signore. Only my orders are to search all vehicles that come down this road.' Giving the Aston Martin a brief but efficient check, he stood back and saluted. Tfou may continue, signore.'

With a shrug of curiosity Brett followed the Fiat through the roadblock. He drove slowly, taking in the names of the imposing buildings that lined the

road. After half a minute he parked and crossed the pavement towards an apartment block. Pausing outside a side door he consulted a piece of paper. Satisfied the address was correct, he pressed the belL

As he waited he heard the sound of hard rock music. He pressed the bell again and when no one answered turned the door handle. The music hit an even louder pitch as the door opened to his touch-He stepped inside, only to wince at the noise and the scene. He was standing in a photographer's studio of extravagant and bizarre taste. The two high side walls were covered with blown-up photographs. All were of the same girl, dark-haired and beautiful, in different kookie poses. The interior wall, which had a door, was draped by white curtains on which huge eyes had been painted. The effect was that all appeared to be staring accusingly at the astonished Brett.

The deafening rock came from an enthusiast's collection of hi-fi equipment, with two large speakers providing the volume. High powered photographic gear, with reflectors and arc lights, stood arranged round a huge plaster hand in the centre of the floor. Standing on its 'wrist' the hand's fingers reached halfway to the ceiling. Gilt chains, belts and other hippie gear were draped over it. Brett's dazed eyes settled last but not least on the girl who, with her back to him, was bending over the viewfinder of a large camera. He guessed her age at about twenty-five and could see enough of her to realize she was the girl in the blown-up photographs. She was wearing mauve slacks and a lighter mauve shirt - modern gear that set off her excellent figure and made her look very glamorous. Her preoccupation told Brett the rock music had drowned the sound of his entry. As she studied the huge hand through the viewfinder, her hips gyrated to the music in a way that earned Brett's wholehearted approval. As he resisted the temptation to announce his presence with an open-handed slap, the girl primed the delayed release of the camera, ran forward and draped herself across the huge hand in a pose that showed off her clothes and superb figure.

It was only when the electronic flash died that she noticed Brett. Totally unembarrassed she gave him a bright smile and moved away from the plaster hand.

'Hil'

"Hello,' Brett said. ‘ I did ring.'

Neither could hear the other for the shattering sound of the music.

The girl waved a hand at the hi-fi. 'I can't hear a thing for that.'

Then why don't you turn it off?' Brett suggested.

'I'll tell you what,' the girl said brightly. 'I'll turn it off.'

Giving Brett an approving glance, she swung over to the hi-fi and switched off a knob. Brett muttered a prayer of thanksgiving as the crushing din died away. The girl approached him again.

"Let's start once more. Hi!'

'Hello,' Brett grinned back.

Pausing less than two feet from him, she reached up and touched his face.

'Nice,' she murmured. Taking his chin in her hand, she turned his face in profile. 'Good bones. Beautiful mouth. And that nose is really something.'

Brett captured her hand. If you'll stop talking long enough, I'll say something nice about you.'

She gave an eager laugh. Yes, please. Pay me compliments. Flatter me outrageously. I'll do anything for a man who tells me I'm lovely.'

You're just playing hard to get,' Brett chided. 'What's your name?'

Tm Sid. Sidonie Dexter, really. Now - what do you want to do? Kiss or shake hands?'

' We could try waving,' Brett suggested.

She made a wry moue. 'The old-fashioned type, huh?'

TSTot really. I just feel we ought to stick to the conventions a little while and have a period of courtship.'

' How long a courtship?'

'Oh, a respectable time,' Brett smiled. 'Say ten to fifteen minutes.'

The girl's eyes went wide in mock innocence. 'Hey, Mom - I'm engaged!' Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes and rounded her lips. "You may kiss me.'

Brett leaned forward. As their lips touched and his arms went round her, a voice with an American accent made him stiffen.

'Here we go! The Kissing Bandit strikes again.'

With a long-suffering expression Brett straightened and turned, 'I wondered when you'd spoil the scene.'

Framed in the interior doorway was a handsome, nuggety man with a mass of tousled hair and laughing dark eyes. Danny Wilde, self-made millionaire from the Bronx and once as notorious a playboy as Brett, gave the Englishman a grin as he entered the studio.

You gotta admit I've given you two time to get to know one another. But enough's enough.'

Brett grinned back at him, then turned to the uninhibited Sidonie. 'Good. It worked.'

The girl lifted an eyebrow. 'Worked?'

'Yes. I paid a witch doctor a packet of money to turn him into a toad. And there he is. Worth every penny.'

'Funny, funny,' Danny grunted, putting an arm possessively round Sidonie's slim waist. 'Your witch doctor took you for a ride, El Lordo. AH he did was add to my fatal fascination.'

Don't he too kind to him,' Brett told the girl photographer. It'll hit him too hard when he learns the truth.'

Danny squeezed Sidonie tighter. 'One has to be big, honey. It isn't his fault the brain transplant didn't work.' His tone changed as he steered the girl towards the front door. 'Didn't you say you own some kind of panel truck?'

His question surprised the girl. Tfes. But why?'

'Let's go and get it, baby.'

‘ But what for? You've got a car, haven't you?'

Danny opened the door. Trust me, baby, trust me. After all, I'm the man you're going to marry.'

Brett gave the girl a hurt look. 'Does this mean our engagement is off?'

She tried to pull away from Danny. There's something you'd both better know. I'm fickle.'

Danny drew her outside. "Don't encourage him. This is the time of year when he's dangerous. Let's go and get your truck.'

Sidonie vanished with a bewildered wail. 'But why do you want my old truck? It doesn't make sense.'

The door almost closed, then Danny popped his head back. 'She digs me, kid - really digs me. Make yourself at home.'

In spite of his readiness to enter into their banter, Brett was now looking puzzled. ‘ Why was I asked to come here?'

Tou'll find out in a minute,' Danny grinned. 'I've got to go and fetch the truck.'

Before Brett could say any more, Danny vanished. A few seconds later the interior door opened and three men appeared. Their timing suggested they had been waiting for Danny and Sidonie to exit. An elderly man with a white moustache and a sun-tanned, balding head led them in. Judge Fulton, one-time English High Court Judge who was spending his years of retirement fighting crime, was smiling as he advanced towards Brett with outstretched hand.

'Good of you to come so promptly, Brett. I've someone here I want you to meet.' He motioned at one of the two men. 'Meet Manny Howard.'

A stocky bespectacled man moved forward. Wearing a brown undistinguished suit, he had the anonymous appearance of a civil servant. 'Howard's with the American Embassy,' the Judge told Brett as the two men shook hands.

Howard gave him a warning glance. 'I think the less said about my Embassy the better, Judge.'

Fulton nodded his agreement. 'Of course. This meeting is strictly unofficial, Brett.' His tone changed as he indicated the second man. 'This is Frank Rocco.'

The man he called Rocco gave Brett a surly nod but made no attempt to shake hands. He was as tall as the Englishman, with crisp curly hair, a rugged face, and broad shoulders. Although he was wearing a well-cut grey suit, nothing could disguise that he was a hard man. Brett guessed his age at around thirty-eight.

'I expect you've heard of him,' the Judge said.

Brett nodded curtly. 'I have. But nothing good.'

Then you'll know he's a big wheel in the New York underworld.'

'A polite way of saying he's a gangster.'

Rocco gave the Englishman a scowl. 'I'm over here on business. That's all.'

'I'll bet you are. Dirty business.'

Judge Fulton interrupted their dialogue. 'The United States Treasury Department has Rocco indicted on a tax evasion charge. That's a certain five to ten years. He skipped over to Italy and was safe until he made the mistake of pulling his gun on a rival gangster and killing him.'

'Which means every hood from the other syndicate is after him,' Howard explained. ‘ Not to mention the Italian police.'

Brett was showing his indifference to the gangster's predicament. 'I hope your insurance is paid up, Frank.'

He received another scowl. 'Who needs insurance? I've told you - I'm a business man. I've just done a deal.'

The Judge nodded at Brett. "What Rocco means is that Mr Howard's officials have agreed to reduce charges against him if he is shipped back to the States. In return he'll name names and hand over documents.'

Rocco broke in with a grin. Til give 'em enough to blow the whole East Coast syndicate wide open. Bang-bang 1'

Brett raised an eyebrow. 'And someone once said there is honour among thieves.'

Seeing Brett's dislike of the man, Fulton interjected quickly. 'Brett, with what he knows they'll be able to indict the men at the top. It could be the biggest break-through against organized crime they've ever made in America.'

Brett nodded distastefully at Rocco. "But he gets away with murder. Literally.'

Terhaps,' Fulton agreed. "But because of what he knows and says, a great number of other criminals won't.'

‘ Have you told Danny all this?'

"Yes. And he's agreed to help.'

Frowning heavily, Brett turned to the large camera alongside him and pretended to examine it. After a few seconds his eyes returned to the Judge. Tou'd better fill me in with the details. What exactly are you hoping we'll do?'

'Just get Rocco across the frontier,' Fulton told him. That's alL'

That's all?' Brett repeated.

The Judge ignored his heavy sarcasm. 'Once he's out of Italy, Mr Howard assures me there'll be no problem arranging his transportation back to the States. But you'll appreciate that with the Italian authorities wanting him for murder, the Americans can't act officially without sparking off a major international incident.'

'Quite,' Brett said dryly. ‘ Is the girl in on this?'

'No. We're only here because we needed a safe place to hide Rocco. A friend at the American Embassy talked her into letting us use her apartment but she knows nothing about Rocco.'

'Don't you think she ought to know?'

The Judge looked a trifle sheepish. "We're playing for high stakes, Brett. If the Italian police were to find out, we'd naturally see she was cleared. But as things are it's better for her sake she knows as little as possible.'

Brett turned restlessly away. 'I take it you've got some sort of plan worked out?'

"Yes. Danny has all the details. The immediate problem is to get Rocco past those road blocks.'

Brett was beginning to understand. 'So that's why he's gone to collect the girl's truck?'

'Correct. She's well known here and often takes the truck into town.' The Judge paused, his eyes on Brett's tanned frowning face. 'I want you to help us, Brett, but it must be your decision.'

CHAPTER TWO

Sidonie turned the key, pulled on the handle, and the garage door nipped up and over. She turned brightly. There you are. Paid up and all mine.'

Danny, standing a couple of feet behind her, gave an awed look. You're saying it goes?'

The girl's indignation would have withered a lesser man. 'Goes? I can get up to thirty, sometimes thirty-five in it.'

'Speed crazy,' Danny muttered, moving gingerly forward to inspect the van. A Citroen H7 of indeterminate age, it stood aslant on its worn tyres as if arthritis had affected its suspension. Danny walked round it with some wonder. 'Did you actually buy this?'

"Not actually,' Sidonie confessed. 'I got it as a straight swop for my previous vehicle.'

Danny nodded his understanding as he completed his circuit. 'I get it. You had a bicycle.'

Glaring at him, Sidonie moved towards the driving seat. Ill have you know it's never let me down.'

Danny, opening the opposite door as if afraid it would fall off, climbed gingerly into the passenger seat. 'What do I do now?'

She stared at him. 'Close the door. What else?'

Danny tested it on its hinges. You're sure it's safe?'

With an exclamation she reached across him and slammed the door with a force that made the van's suspension groan. The trouble with you, Danny Wilde, is that you're too used to expensive, lightweight sports cars. These vehicles are built to last. For years and years.'

"You're not fooling,' Danny muttered. As Sidonie inserted the starter key he leaned forward uneasily. 'I'd better tell you now - I'm not too good with lady drivers. To be really honest, I'd rather go out on a mission with a...'

'A Kamakazi pilot,' the girl chanted in unison. 'Save me the lady driver jokes I There isn't one I haven't heard.'

‘ Now I feel better,' Danny grinned.

Scornfully Sidonie turned the key. The Citroen, left in reverse, jumped back

a foot and stalled. With pink cheeks, Sidonie took it out of gear and tried again. The starter motor, winding round, sounded asthmatic and weary. At the same moment the horn went ofi with a blast that stiffened Danny in his seat. Reaching forward the girl took a large wrench from the cab locker and slammed it against the dashboard. The horn stopped and the engine fired. As its unsteady beat rocked the van, Sidonie turned proudly. listen to that power I 111 bet even your Ferrari can't match it.'

Danny looked as if his teeth were rattling out of his mouth. Tou're right. I don't know if it's significant, but it has the same tempo as the Dead March from Saul.'

Before he could say more the Citroen jerked forward. Grabbing hold of his seat, Danny closed his eyes. 'I hope your insurance cover's good.'

The girl's answer was drowned by the clattering roar of the engine as the van rolled out on the road and rumbled down it in a cloud of blue smoke.

"Here's the truck.' The growl came from Rocco standing at the studio window.

Judge Fulton moved alongside the sullen gangster, then turned to Brett. 'Are you helping Danny or not? We have to move quickly in case the police start a house-to-house search.'

Before Brett could reply, footsteps sounded outside and Danny entered the studio. He pretended to look shaken as he grinned at Brett. 'Anyone know how a heart attack feels? I think I've just had one. You know how that kook avoids the rest of the traffic? She drives on the sidewalk.'

'Are you ready to go?' the Judge asked.

Danny nodded. Tfeah. Sid's driven the truck round into the back alley.' As Rocco started towards the interior door, he turned to Brett. "You in, El Lordo?'

Brett sighed resignedly. *1* suppose I've litde choice. We've an old family maxim - one must never send a boy to do a man's work.'

Danny paused and glowered. If that means what I think it means ...'

Judge Fulton, showing his relief at Brett's decision, pushed both of them after Rocco. 'Remember one thing. You're strictly on your own. If the Italian authorities find out what the Americans are doing, we'll have a diplomatic incident that'll turn the White House grey.'

Danny flipped a nonchalant hand as he went out. 'Go home and relax, Judge. Rocco's as good as testifying already.'

Howard gave Fulton an uneasy glance as Brett followed Danny through the apartment. Think they can do it?' he muttered. They seem a pretty kookie pair to me.'

A smile played around the Judge's lips. 'Don't worry. They've worked with me before. You wouldn't find a better team anywhere.'

Outside in the alley Sidonie was waiting beside the open rear door of the Citroen. As the three men approached her, Danny turned to Rocco. 'OK fella. Inside!' He glanced at Brett. 'I figure they'll only make a cursory check but if

they should spot him we'll make a break for it.'

'As subtle as an H bomb,' Brett murmured.

Danny scowled but ignored his sarcasm. Your job is to stay behind me in your car and see what help you can give if we need it.' He pushed Rocco into the van. 'OK. Now let's get you buried.'

Brett followed both men inside, stepping over tarpaulins and the spare wheel on the way. The front half was curtained off for use as a mobile dark room and separated from the rear half by a hinged bench that folded upwards. The floor was littered with cigarette ends and discarded photographic equipment.

Danny indicated the floor behind the folded bench. 'Come on, Frankie baby. Hit the dirt.'

The smartly-dressed Rocco reacted sharply. 'I'm not lying in that garbage.'

'Oh, come on, Frank/ Brett urged, eyes twinkling. It'll be just like home.'

He received a hard stare. Tier's get something straight. I've done a deal with Howard. Which means I ain't no piece of freight'

Danny grinned at Brett. "Has he done a deal with us? Not that I know of.'

That's what I thought.' Danny turned to the scowling Rocco. 'Which means you're freight, Frankie. Move it or get out and take your chance.'

Giving the two men another hard look Rocco moved forward and crouched in the front of the van. He stared back bleakly. 'Ill remember you two.'

"Lovely title for a song,' Brett said blandly.

Danny gave Rocco a gentle shove between the shoulder blades that sat him down. With Brett helping him, he began piling tarpaulins over the prostrate man. Rocco began squirming beneath them, his voice muffled. 'Take it easy, will you? I can't breathe.'

Exchanging mock sympathetic glances, the two men piled on still more tarpaulins. When Rocco was fully covered Danny unhooked the workbench and lowered it on its chains until it lay in a horizontal position. As a final touch Brett leaned the spare wheel against it. Both men moved back to survey their handiwork.

'Make like you're dead,' Danny told the invisible Rocco. 'Or you probably will be.'

As he jumped down alongside Sidonie, Brett pulled across the curtain that sealed off the dark room section. Danny locked the rear doors and then handed Brett a folded map.

"You'll find a meeting point marked if anything should go wrong.'

As Brett examined the map, Danny turned to say goodbye to Sidonie. Grinning, his gestures histrionic, he kissed her full on the mouth. 'Arrivederci, honey. But don't worry - I'll be back.'

As he broke away, Brett moved in smoothly and repeated the act. Sidonie clapped her hands in delight. 'I like it, I like it.'

Waving at them, she vanished down the side of the van. Danny, businesslike again, turned to Brett. 'Pick me up in the street. And stay close,

will you?'

'I'll be there,' Brett told him.

As the Englishman walked back into the apartment, Danny opened the battered cab door. He was halfway into the driver's seat when he heard a demure 'Hi!' Turning sharply he saw Sidonie ensconced alongside him. Her smile was pure innocence.

'Parting was too painful. I've decided to come with you.'

For once Danny was thrown. ' Now wait a minute. That's ridiculous ...'

"What's ridiculous?'

Tou can't come - that's what's ridiculous. Go and take some more photographs of yourself.'

'Why can't I come? Because it's Frank Rocco back in there?'

Danny's mouth fell open. ' How did you guess that?'

'Beautiful I might be,' Sidonie said scornfully. 'Dumb I'm not.'

'All right, so it's Rocco. The guy all the police and all the hoods in Italy are after. And the reason you stay home like a good girl.'

Sidonie's expression, a mixture of anticipation and tenacity, showed a side of the career girl that Danny had not seen before. This could be the hottest photo-news story of the year. Smuggling a wanted killer out of the country - with pictures every inch of the way ...' She hugged herself. "What are we waiting for?'

Reaching across, Danny flung open the opposite door. 'Allez! Vamoose! Out!'

The girl shook her head. Try to stop me and I'll blow the whistle on you. Cross my heart.'

Danny was breathing hard. 'I suppose I could slug you.'

Sidonie reached into the cab locker and pulled out the huge monkey wrench. TTou could try,' she said demurely.

Danny eyed the wrench, took another look at her determined face, and accepted defeat. The starter wheezed asth-matically as he turned the ignition key and the blast of the horn sent a cluster of starlings scattering from a nearby fence. Sidonie slammed the dashboard with the wrench and blue smoke enveloped the cab. Scowling at her, Danny eased the Citroen into gear and started towards the road.

Ahead of the Citroen Italian policemen were examining a Renault and questioning the driver. Checking his mirror Danny saw Brett's Aston Martin tucked in behind him. As the police stood back and waved the Renault through the roadblock, Danny tapped on the panel behind him.

'Keep it still now, Frankie. Our turn's coming up.'

Gears grinding, the Citroen lurched forward. As two policemen approached, Danny gave Sidonie a somewhat tense wink and jumped down from the cab. Adopting a bright and breezy manner he addressed the policemen in a mixture of English and atrocious Italian.

‘ Buon giorno, signore! So you still haven't captured the delinquente, huh?'

The larger of the two policemen pointed at the rear of the Citroen, 'Apri la porta!'

Caught at first base, Danny glanced up at Sidonie who was sitting bolt upright in the passenger seat. She gave him a frozen smile. 'He says open the back doors.'

'The back doors,' Danny repeated. 'Why sure. Of course.’ Feigning unconcern, his light banter of English and Italian coming faster than ever, he led the two men to the rear of the van.

"You know, I've got a theory about this hombre, Rocco. You like to hear it? I think he's lying doggo. E sempre nei dintomi. Yeah, until the heat's off. In one of those apartments. Capire?'

Neither policeman showed the slightest sign of understanding. The larger one took the key from his hand and opened the van doors. Inside the Aston Martin Brett leaned forward anxiously. Trying to hide his concern, Danny gave him a wink and then climbed in after the policeman. Tfou wanta help ...'

The second policeman tapped his leg and indicated him to get out. As the reluctant American obeyed, the man climbed in after his colleague.

Standing on the road, Danny watched the first policeman draw aside the black curtains and peer over the workbench. His companion, after rummaging amongst the photographic equipment, rolled aside the spare wheel that leaned against the bench. Catching Brett's eye, Danny began to edge sideways, ready to make his break.

The first policeman was now on his knees, reaching beneath the bench for the tarpaulins that lay beyond it. As Brett caught a glimpse of Danny's dismayed face he acted promptly. Switching on his engine he revved it hard for a moment to draw the attention of the police. As their heads turned, he swung on full lock to avoid the van and with wheels screaming for traction he made for the narrow gap in the roadblock between the police car and the pavement. At the same time he leaned sideways as if he were pressing someone out of sight with his left arm.

Police scattered in all directions as the Aston Martin leapt forward. To get through the roadblock Brett had to mount the kerb and for a moment the car wobbled dangerously. As startled faces blurred past Brett shouted out as loudly as he could: 'Rocco! Keep your head down!' A couple of seconds later the Aston Martin was back on the road and throwing dust as it accelerated away.

Policemen ran for their motor cycles and kick-started their engines. Sirens added to the din as one by one they began streaming after Brett. Abandoned by the two policemen who ran towards their car, Danny breathed a sigh of relief.

Ahead, Brett had already swung out of sight and was clearly going to give his pursuers a hard run for their money. With the road clear of police Danny risked a glance back. Three hundred yards down the road he could see two

tiny figures at the studio window. Giving them a reassuring wave, he climbed back into the Citroen.

Half-expecting a badly-rattled girl in the cab, he found Sidonie with a camera in her hand and her face ablaze with excitement. 'I've got some marvellous photographs I If the rest of the trip goes like this, it's going to be super.'

The American's expression was comical as he stared at her. Tou do this at hangings too?'

Her tone changed. 'They won't catch him, will they?'

Danny slipped in the ignition key. 'I'll tell you something. That foxy Englishman's been chased by some of the fastest women in the world and never got caught. And Fuzz ain't as fast as Femmes.'

Sidonie's smile was reflective. 'I'm glad. He's got such a super profile.'

Giving her one of his humorous scowls, Danny shifted into gear and drove the van down the cleared road. Neither he nor Sidonie took notice of a large white Mercedes parked two hundred yards ahead. The driver was the gaunt Manetti, the well-dressed man in the rear seat was Torino. Sitting by a radio telephone Torino was jotting down car registration numbers and the van held his attention as it rumbled past. Picking up the telephone he spoke tersely into it. Then he clicked his fingers at the driver.

Ahead the battered van turned down a side road in the opposite direction to which Brett had taken. Meeting the driver's inquiring glance, Torino nodded. The huge Mercedes purred unobtrusively and began to pick up speed.

CHAPTER THREE

The Citroen came down on its arthritic suspension with a jolt that made Danny wince and cling to the wheeL The country road, although winding through picturesque scenery, was rutted and uneven. Alongside Danny an unperturbed Sidonie was taking a profile shot of him. Noticing her he turned his head briefly and gave her the full eyes and teeth treatment.

She triggered the shutter. Til sell that one to advertise toothpaste.'

The Citroen, bucking again, checked Danny's comment. As it steadied, a first could be heard hammering against the cab bulkhead. Tou think he's trying to tell us something?' Sidonie asked.

Danny, who had been "given time to reflect on the situation, was frowning. 'Forget Rocco and listen to me. From here on, things could start getting rough. Some pretty mean people will be trying to stop us, and...'

Sidonie's expression changed. 'If you're starting a pitch to get rid of me, forget it.'

Danny put on bis most earnest face. TBelieve me, Sid -it's for your own sake.'

TJh, uh. You sound like my uncle Matt.'

‘ But it is,' Danny insisted.

Sidonie took a firmer grip of her seat. 'Get something into your head, Danny Wilde. Like it or not, I'm here to stay.'

As Danny showed his disapproval there was a loud bang and a jet of steam shot up from the van's radiator. Danny's look of horror was balanced by the girl's unmoved comment, 'Don't worry - it does that all the time. This van uses more water than gas.'

Danny peered at the uninhabited countryside that surrounded them. Braking, he reached forward for the ignition key. 'So what happens now?'

She drew back his hand. 'Just keep going.'

"Keep going! With that head of steam?'

She nodded brightly. 'I once ran it for an hour like that. Maybe it can run on steam. Or maybe it's just got used to being thirsty. Anyway, it still goes.'

Danny took his foot gingerly off the brake. Blowing steam like a spent whale, the Citroen moved reluctantly forward again. Nursing it over the hills for three miles the American saw an isolated building ahead. With a few tables outside and a couple of stalls displaying vegetables, it gave the appearance of being both a shop and tavern for the local farming community. As the Citroen coasted downhill, its owner was sitting in the sun at one of the tables. A thin man with a warty face, a brigand-style moustache, and acquisitive eyes, he watched the steaming van with interest as it drew up on the roadside. Nodding at Danny's atrocious Italian, he went into the shop for a bucket of water.

As Sidonie jumped down to stretch her legs, Danny gave her money. 'Pick up some food and wine, will you? I'll take a look at Rocco.'

Unlocking the rear doors he found Rocco sitting on a box at the back of the van. Sweating and dirt-stained, he shaded his eyes as the sunlight streamed in.

'About time,' he growled, starting to his feet. 'It's like a washing machine in here.'

Where do you think you're going?' Danny asked.

Rocco swung down a leg. Tm riding up front.'

Danny shoved him back. "Not a chance, buster.'

Rocco glared at him. That's stupid. We're out in the country now. So who's going to recognize me?'

‘Nobody because nobody's going to see you. You're staying in here.'

For a moment it seemed the tough Rocco might dispute the point. Then, with an infuriating grin, he dropped back on the box. *'I* get it, boy scout. You like playing boss man. OK, I won't spoil your fun. Yet 1'

Danny controlled his temper with an eSort. "We're not far from the place where we're meeting Brett. You can stretch your legs when we get there.'

"Why wait for him?' Rocco growled. 'I say we just keep going.'

The shopkeeper had arrived at the front of the van with a bucket of water and was gingerly removing the radiator cap. Watching him a moment, Danny turned back to Rocco.

'Say anything you like. We're still doing it my way.'

Sidonie, carrying food and wine, was picking her way through the tables. Rocco waited until she was within earshot, then gave another unpleasant grin. 'I get the act! By playing tough man you're hoping to make time with the girl!'

Breathing hard, Danny was moving forward aggressively when Sidonie pretended to stumble. As she juggled with loaves and bottles of wine, Danny grabbed and steadied her. She gave a relieved laugh. 'Fine old vintage wine! Been in the bottle since yesterday I Thanks.'

Danny took one of the bottles, half a loaf, and a couple of sausages and thrust them at Rocco. The man gave a grunt of disgust. 'This all? They feed you better in the pen.'

‘ You've something to look forward to,' Danny said.

He received another sneer. 'Drive the truck, boy scout. That's what you're here for.'

Catching Sidonie's eye, Danny swung the doors closed. Try not to make too much noise when you're eating.'

Turning the key, he turned to see Sidonie gazing doubtfully at the remainder of the food. 'Think I've got enough? Brett might not have eaten.'

A sudden wicked light came into Danny's eyes. 'You know, it might be a while before we hit a three-star restaurant. Why don't you get the same again?'

She passed the bottles and the food to him. 'All right. It won't take a minute.'

The shopkeeper had finished filling the radiator and was tightening the cap. Danny dumped the food into the van, walked forward and pressed money into his hand. As the man thanked him Danny backed towards the cab. His movements were furtive, his eyes fixed on the shop door. When Sidonie did not appear, a look of triumph crossed his face. Leaping into the driver's seat, he slammed the door and reached for the ignition. His look of triumph died abruptly when he discovered the keys were missing. A girl's voice made him start guiltily.

This what you wanted?'

Sidonie was standing at the passenger window dangling the ignition keys. Scowling, his cheeks pink with guilt, Danny reached over and opened the door. Sidonie climbed in and handed him the keys with a sniff of triumph. TTou know something? You're sneaky.'

TTou know something else?' Danny growled, ramming home the keys. 'You're sneakier.'

He started the engine and the Citroen jerked forward. Looking rather smug, Sidonie settled back into her seat. Standing by one of the tables the shopkkeeper was watching their progress. He waited until the ancient van had almost reached the top of the hill, then he turned and ran inside for the telephone.

The pebbles of the dried-up riverbed shone white in the sunlight. Trees and

bushes grew down its steep banks and tiny lizards basked on stones and boulders. The air was still with the drowsy hum of summer.

The sound of an engine made the lizards dart for shelter. A few seconds later the Citroen appeared round a bend in the river. Once again steam was issuing from its radiator as its tyres crunched on the pebbles. It pulled up near a small bridge that spanned the creek and its engine spluttered and died. Sidonie opened her door, stared up and down the riverbed, and turned to Danny with some concern.

'Where's Brett?'

Danny jumped out of the cab. 'He'll make it. Let's relax for a while.'

He unlocked the rear door and Rocco, sweating and bad-tempered from the heat, climbed out. 'What you tryin' to do - fry me? It's like the Black Hole of Calcutta inside there.'

Danny indicated the shade of the overhanging trees. Tou can cool off while we wait for Brett.'

Rocco scowled at him. ‘ We shouldn't be hangin' around here waiting for anybody. Your play is to put me up front and make straight for the frontier.'

Before Danny could answer, Rocco caught sight of Sidonie. She had withdrawn a few paces from the van and had her camera aimed at the two men. As she triggered the shutter, Rocco started angrily towards her.

'Give me that.’

Sidonie drew back. "Why?'

Rocco took a grab at the camera. 'I'm not having shots of me plastered in some magazine. I said give it to me.'

This time he caught hold of the girl and tried to wrestle the camera from her. Danny grabbed his shoulder and yanked him away. 'All right - you've something to prove. So prove it to me.'

For a moment the two men stood staring at one another like dogs with their hackles up. Danny, spoiling for a fight, was moving in when Rocco gave his infuriating grin. Tough guy,' he sneered. 'You scare me to death.'

Turning his back, he walked towards a clump of gums. Still burning, Danny started after him when Sidonie caught his arm. 'Come on,' she urged quietly. 'Let's have a drink and I'll fix you something to eat.'

For a moment Danny resisted her. Then he allowed her to lead him to the Citroen where, after handing him a bottle of wine, she began sharing out the food. Rocco ate his beneath the clump of gums: Danny and the girl beneath the bridge.

The shadows of the trees began lengthening on the river-bank. With the Citroen now shaded by them, Sidonie stretched out on the front seat and went to sleep. Danny sat outside with his back supported by one of the front wheels. Half asleep, he was tossing pebbles absent-mindedly at an empty wine bottle. Rocco, who had been lying beneath the gums for the last hour, moved over and sat beside a rock no more than six paces away.

Danny glanced up, then, ignoring him, continued throwing pebbles.

Amused, Rocco watched him until Danny could ignore his stare no longer. His eyes lifted again, this time aggressively.

"What's with you?'

T keep wondering about you, buster,' Rocco said. ‘ How come you're stuck out in the middle of Italy with a beat-up truck and the chance of gettin' your head blown offl'

That's easy. I'm a sucker for a fast buck.'

Rocco sneered. 'Don't put me on, mister. You come from the same rotten slum as me. And you made it big. So why this schtick?'

"What are you? Some kind of analyst or something?'

Tfou're loaded,' Rocco said again. 'Anything money can buy, you got. Then why this?'

Danny, suddenly reflective, threw another pebble before answering. "Ever tried buying self-respect?'

He received a grin, listen - I know what money can get you. I'm an easy touch -1 give away plenty.'

'Giving's not enough, Frankie baby. You've got to get something back.'

‘ Like what?'

Impatient with himself for his efforts to communicate with the man, Danny hurled a pebble at a distant tree. "Let's just say excitement. It makes me feel alive.'

'Excitement? Listen - for kicks you could hold up a gas station. Or rob a bank.'

Face registering his dislike, Danny stood up. ‘ You're a real tiger, aren't you? Now knock it off. I'm going over to those trees for a sleep.'

His back against the rock, Rocco watched him walk towards the gums. TBoy scout,' he growled loudly.

Danny glanced back, then sank down in the shade. In the silence that fell the hum of the insects returned and the lizards crept out to make the most of the remaining sunlight.

Sidonie saw Danny glance surreptitiously at his watch and turned towards him in concern. 'He's really late now, isn't he?'

Danny shifted uneasily. 'A few minutes maybe.'

'A few minutes/ the girl said scornfully. 'You expected him hours ago.'

The two of them were standing at the bend in the river. The shadows of the trees stretched almost to the opposite bank and the air was perceptibly cooler.

'Hell make it,' Danny said, attempting a grin. 'There's only one police force after him.'

The whirring of a self-starter made both of them start. Forty yards back Rocco was seated at the wheel of the Citroen. Leaning out, he gave them a shout. 'OK. We've fooled around here long enough. Let's go.'

Danny sprinted down the riverbed, plunged a hand into the cab, and snatched out the keys. We're going nowhere. Not yet.'

Rocco jumped out and faced him. The planes of his face were flat and hard. "Now listen, buster. I've done all the waitin' I'm doing.'

Wrong. You're waiting until Brett gets here.'

'Brett's not getting here. Any fool can see that.'

Danny gave him a look and turned away. A second later he stumbled as Rocco grabbed his shoulder. 'I'm taking those keys, buster.'

Danny, whose self-restraint to this point would have amazed his friends, turned slowly. You're doing what?'

Tm taking those keys. Now.'

Unholy was the only word that could describe Danny's expression. You are? How?'

Moving fast, Rocco's hand went inside his jacket and came out holding a revolver. The sight made Danny blink but he recovered quickly.

You ready to use that?'

Try me. Another body don't make much difference. The keys!'

Sidonie was watching them with concern from the bend in the river. About to run towards them she gave a start, then a shout. There's a car coming I'

As Rocco reacted, Danny chopped the revolver from his hand. Cursing, Rocco dived for it, only to run into Danny's swinging fist. A moment later the two men, kicking and punching, were rolling over in the pebbles.

As Sidonie ran forward to part them a car appeared round the river bend. Rocco caught sight of it at the same time as the girl and let out a warning yelL "Look out. Police!'

Checking the punch he was about to throw, Danny saw he was right and grabbed hold of Sidonie. Take off time, honey,' he panted.

With pebbles scrabbling beneath their feet, the three of them fled along the riverbed. Hearing the car approaching fast Danny drew Sidonie behind one of the piers of the bridge. Rocco flattened alongside him. His growl was like the rasp of a file.

If you hadn't made that fool play and I still had the gun...'

Danny turned fiercely. 'Get this straight! You don't throw anything at 'em, not even a powderpuff. Sid and I are in deep enough already.'

Behind the bridge the rattling of pebbles ceased as the police car halted. Rocco and Danny were eyeing the steep, bush-covered river bank and estimating their chances. Rocco's whisper came from the corner of his mouth. 'Ready to go?'

Danny glanced uneasily at Sidonie. Think you can make it?'

The girl's eyes flashed at him. 'Stop condescending me, Danny Wilde.'

The car door slammed and the crunch of footsteps sounded. Danny gave an urgent signal and the three edged round the pier in preparation to making their dash. As Danny opened his mouth to yell, a bland voice froze him.

You three look like old ladies who've seen a mouse.'

Danny spun round. Brett was smiling at them from the side of the pier. Danny's voice was a mixture of relief and exasperation.

What are you doing in that fuzz car?'

Looking as unruffled as if he had just come from his tailor, Brett raised an eyebrow at Sidonie. 'Isn't a litde welcome called for?'

The girl threw her arms around his neck. 'I knew you'd get here.'

Brett took full advantage of her enthusiasm before turning back to Danny. 'Sorry if I'm late but these police drivers are remarkably good. I had to change cars three times before I shook them off.'

Danny was eyeing the police car with some disgust. "How come you got this?'

He received an imperturbable shrug. 'Simple, really. It was the only car in the street with the keys left in.'

Giggling with delight Sidonie hugged him again. 'Didn't I say he was wonderful?'

'For a dumb dumb, he can be pretty smart sometimes,' Danny admitted.

It was as near a compliment as Danny was ever likely to make the Englishman, and Brett received it with a gracious nod. Thank you, Daniel. I must really try to find something about you to praise sometime. It will strain my resources but I shall try.' 'Oh funny, funny,' Danny growled.

Brett pointed at the police car. The radio in there was a mine of information. It said this was the hottest car in Italy. The second hottest,' and he turned towards the Citroen, 'is that dinky van of yours. Every policeman in Italy has its number.' Danny sighed and stared at the densely-covered hills that surrounded them. 'Anyone for a cross-country run?'

Sidonie let out a wail of protest. 'You don't mean leave my van behind?'

Brett took her arm. 'No tears, darling. Even the best of friends have to part sometime.'

"But someone might steal her 1'

Grinning, Danny took her arm. 'Even Rocco wouldn't do a thing like that. With that chassis she'd be safe at a Buffalo Convention. Believe an expert, honey.'

It was almost dusk when the police car, speeding over the bridge, braked with a squeal of tyres. The plain-clothes detective in the passenger seat was pointing downwards and his voice had an excited edge as he gave orders to the driver. The car went into reverse and a couple of minutes later was bumping over the pebbled riverbed towards the abandoned Citroen and police car.

Guns in hand, three policemen jumped out and surrounded the two vehicles. Finding them empty, the detective ordered the fiver banks to be searched while he ran back to his car. As he spoke into the radio, a white Mercedes drove smoothly over the bridge, followed by a second car containing four men. In the rear seat Torino was taking in the scene as he leaned forward and tapped the driver's shoulder. 'Don't slow down I don't want the police to become suspicious.' Reaching for his car telephone, he lifted the receiver.

They have left their cars, so the chances are they are on foot in the area. Contact all our local people and give orders they must be found - if Rocco escapes our influence would be seriously weakened. And the others must not Uve as witnesses. Yes; I shall stay in the district. Report, to me immediately you have located them.'

He replaced the receiver and gave a signal to the gauntfaced Manetti. Followed by the smaller car, the Mercedes began to gather speed. A few minutes later, like a great white cat hunting for prey, it slid into the hills and the approaching night.

CHAPTER FOUR

The moonlight was brilliant and threw jet-black shadows across the path that contoured the hillside. The sage bushes were in seed and their pollen rose like dust as the four trudging figures brushed against them. Brett was in the lead, followed respectively by Sidonie, Danny, and Rocco. Their weary pace told they had been walking for a long time. The noise of cicadas was loud and the night air smelt of sage and wild thyme. As they approached a dwarf tree, something dark broke from its shadow and plunged into the bushes.

All four figures stopped dead. Danny's hoarse whisper sounded loud in the sudden silence. 'What was that?'

Brett turned. 'Probably a goat.'

'Probably? Didn't you see it?'

‘ Will you two stop yappin' and get on?' The growl came from Rocco. 'We've a long way to go before morning.'

As a small breeze stirred the dry leaves and carried away the scent of sage, Brett sniffed, then wrinkled his nose fastidiously. I've got evidence. It was a goat,'

Rocco muttered something and pushed forward again. Ahead, Brett held back a springy branch to let Sidonie through. Taking the branch from Brett, Danny grinned wickedly. He waited a couple of seconds and then released it suddenly. Behind him Rocco let out a curse and lifted a hand to his cheek. With a malicious chuckle Danny hurried on after Sidonie who was disappearing round a bend in the path.

They came across the old villa half an hour later. Its tall, elegant gates stood at one side of a minor road that ran through the valley. The gates were open and led into spacious grounds dotted with trees, flower beds and ornamental shrubs. The villa could just be seen, white and regal in the moonlight,

The four fugitives crouched among thick bushes just inside the gates. Danny was peering at a coin Brett was holding out to him. Heads was uppermost, and it was obvious from Danny's disgusted expression that he had lost the toss.

'You're making a mistake. A guy who owns a joint like this is sure to be an

aristocrat. Which means you're the one to speak his language.'

He received Brett's most quizzical smile. 'With land taxes and death duties? My dear Daniel, the chances are ten to one he'll turn out to be a rich American.'

There was a heartfelt groan from Sidonie. 'I wish you two would make up your minds. My stomach's starting to lose faith in me.'

Danny met Brett's glance and scowled. 'All right, all right. Sit here and make time with her while I risk my life.' He turned to Rocco who was sprawled out on the grass and tapped his shoulder. 'That doesn't include you. Up!'

He received a surly stare. 'What do you want me for?'

'My peace of mind. You're not resting here while I work. It's against the rules of my union. On your feet.'

For a moment it seemed Rocco would refuse. Then, growling something, he pushed after Danny through the bushes. As they reached the drive, headlights swung over the wall that surrounded the grounds. Danny grabbed Rocco's shoulder and both men dropped flat. A few seconds later two police motorcycles and a police car roared past the open gates. Danny waited a moment, then pushed Rocco forward. 'OK. Let's go.'

Back in the moonlit clearing Brett and Sidonie heard their footsteps receding down the drive. Relaxing, Sidonie leaned back, her head against Brett's knee. She rubbed a shoulder ruefully. 'Now I know what it feels like to be run over by a two-ton truck.'

Brett reached forward and began massaging the muscles of her neck. She started, then gave a purr of pleasure. 'Yes, please. I like it.'

She moved her head and neck sensuously to the pressure of his hands. The soft night breeze brought the scent of datura and heliotrope. Her cheek touched and leaned against his wrist. 'Explain something to me, will you? Why do you work for Judge Fulton?'

His hands paused a moment, then continued their massage. Why shouldn't I?'

The question made her frown. 'I suppose it's because of what you've got. Money, position, everything. Why take risks when you've got so much to lose?'

He sounded amused. 'It's only a year since I was racing at Monza, you know.'

She nodded thoughtfully. 'I remember reading about that. You crashed, didn't you? At over a hundred miles an hour.'

Brett smiled. 'At 130 to be precise. It wasn't one of my better days.'

'Was it very awful?'

‘Not at all. As a matter of fact I didn't feel anything.'

'You mean you weren't afraid?'

'No. No fear, no excitement, nothing. That's what "the good life" had done to me.'

'And it's different now?'

'Yes. I've never felt so alive. It's the same with Danny. The Judge came along just in time for both of us.'

She twisted round indignandy. 'What are you trying to give me? That you're only doing this work for kicks?'

In the moonlight she could only see his smiling lips: his eyes were hidden from her. What else?'

TDon't give me that, Brett Sinclair,' she said huskily. 'Give me a kiss instead.'

They were still kissing when the bushes rustled and Danny, followed by Rocco, came out into the moonlight. He stood eyeing them balefully. 1 knew it. I do all the work and he gets all the bread.'

Sidonie pulled away from Brett with a jerk. 'Bread? Where?'

Danny indicated the moonlit villa. 'There's a lovely guy in there. A sweetheart. I told him we'd broken down on the road and that was it. He's going to arrange for a car and we're all invited for supper.'

Sidonie shot to her feet. 'Supper! You mean it?'

That's what the guy said.'

Sidonie threw her arms around him. 'Danny Wilde, you're wonderful. I was just telling Brett. The greatest.' She implanted a huge kiss on his cheek, then shot a defiant glance at Brett. 'I told you I was fickle.'

Brett's eyes twinkled. 'Let's just say hungry!' He turned to Danny. 'Do you think we can trust him?'

The girl caught their arms and dragged them forward. The guy's going to feed us, isn't he? For that he can be the chief of police. Let's go.'

The man who met them at the large, ornate door of the villa was between sixty-five and seventy. He was wearing a dark suit with a monogrammed tie, and his silver hair, slender build, and sensitive face gave him a distinguished appearance. Breeding was in his every gesture as he welcomed them into the hall.

'My name is Count Sangallo. I am sorry to hear of your breakdown but delighted I can be of service to you.'

Winking happily at Brett, Danny introduced them. Pausing in front of Sidonie, the Count took her hand and raised it to his lips. His voice caressed her. ' We are enchanted that fate has brought you to our home, signorina. Your presence brings lustre to our drab life.'

Behind the Italian Danny pulled an extravagant face. Delighted by the compliment, Sidonie threw him a glare before melting to the Count. 'Thank you. You're most kind.'

'Not kind, signorina. I am honoured. This way, please.'

The four fugitives were ushered through a panelled hall into a spacious living room. The Count closed the door and walked towards an ornate table on which stood a decanter and a cluster of crystal glasses.

'Perhaps you will first honour my house by accepting a glass of wine?'

Brett and Danny thanked him. The Italian's eyes moved to Sidonie. 'Signorina?'

Sidonie was taking in the large room. Its chief feature was a magnificent marble chimneypiece. The walls were covered with tooled leather books, fine drapes, and oil paintings. There was a suit of armour beside an interior door and a larger-than-life statue of Aphrodite standing alongside a pair of closed french windows. When the girl did not speak, the Count drew nearer.

'Signorina. You will honour me by accepting a glass of wine?'

Sidonie recovered herself. Thank you. But if you don't mind, I'd like to freshen up first.'

Sangallo made a tut of self-reproach. 'But of course. My apologies, signorina.' He indicated the door beside the suit of armour. ‘ You will find all you require in there.'

He turned back to the wine table. Sidonie, passing Brett as she made for the cloakroom, threw a quip from the side of her mouth. Tlow'd you like a little lustre bringing into your drab life? You heard the man - I'm loaded.’

Brett took a discreet swipe at her but she side-stepped adroitly and vanished through the door. At the table San-gallo was filling glasses while Danny stood admiringly alongside him.

1 just want to tell you, Count baby, that this is real hospitality and we all appreciate it,'

'You're very kind,' the Italian murmured, turning with a tray of filled glasses. Rocco took his glass with a surly grunt. Brett gazed appreciatingly around the room. 'You have a very beautiful home, sir.’

Sangallo inclined his head. Thank you. Once my family owned all the land in the area but wars, taxes and several generations of profligacy have reduced our standards.' He raised his glass in a toast. To hospitality and understand-tog!'

All three men drank except Rocco who had been looking edgy ever since they entered the house. "How soon do we get that car?'

Both Danny and Brett winced at the blunt question but the Count showed no offence. 'I will telephone for one immediately. But I must warn you it will take some hours to get here.'

Then we can't wait,' Rocco growled, starting for the door.

Danny stepped in front of him. Why don't you cool it?'

The Count looked solicitous as Sidonie re-entered the room. 'If you are concerned about accommodation for the night I shall be delighted to prepare rooms.'

'Who wants accommodation?' Rocco muttered. 'I want to be on my way.'

'We appreciate your offer,' Brett said. 'But well be quite comfortable here until the car arrives.'

Sangallo moved to the door. 'As you wish. Now, if you'll excuse me, 111 phone for the car and then have your meal prepared.'

Bowing, he went out into the hall and closed the door. Sidonie flung apart

her arms and sank down on a luxurious settee. 'Now that is Mr Charm himself, Why don't the three of you ask him for lessons?'

Rocco moved restlessly around the room like an animal scenting danger. Tm for getting out of here. It'll be a couple of hours before well have finished eating.'

Brett steered him towards an armchair. "You're trying to qualify for the Olympic boring team. Just relax.'

Danny, pouring a glass of wine for Sidonie, was less polite. ‘ Look - if you want to try to make it without us, go ahead. If you don't, shut up. Right?'

In an effort to lower the temperature Sidonie raised her glass. To our host. An aristocrat and a gentleman.' She took a sip, then gave a wistful sigh - 'and a guy who knows how to bring the best out of a girl.'

It was a remark that brought a half-smile to the man listening at the door outside. Straightening, he tip-toed across the marble-tiled hall and picked up the telephone receiver. He dialled quickly, his eyes on the closed living room door. As a voice crackled he lowered his head. He spoke in rapid, somewhat nervous Italian.

listen - this is Sangallo. They are here - all four of them. Yes, yes, at my villa ...' He paused as the distant voice crackled instructions, then nodded. 'I understand, Don't worry. They will not get away.'

He lowered the receiver and stood watching the closed door for a moment. Then, satisfied, he turned and vanished into the shadows across the halL

CHAPTER FIVE

Danny stretched out his legs and gave a sigh of contentment. 'Marvellous. Just marvellous.'

He, Brett and Sidonie were grouped in comfortable chairs round the great chimneypiece. With brandy glasses in then-hands, all looked replete from the meal whose remains lay on a table near by. As the smiling Count approached with a decanter, Danny put a hand over his glass. 'I want to but I can't. I'm telling you, Count sweetheart, that I haven't eaten and drunk so well in a long time.'

‘You're too kind,signore,'the Count murmured,moving on to Sidonie and Brett. Both had to decline. Rocco, sitting apart from the others and taking no part in their conversation, gave a surly grunt of refusal. The Count looked concerned. There must be something more I can do for you. Perhaps a little fruit? Or a water ice?'

Brett, half-asleep like the others, made an effort and sat up. ‘ You've done everything, sir. And we've kept you from your bed too long.'

The glance Sangallo gave Sidonie was like a caress. "No one could feel tired in the presence of such a beautiful lady, signore.' As Sidonie came awake and purred, he turned back to the men. 'However, if you are all quite certain

there is nothing more you require ...'

'Certain,' Danny told him. Tfou've been the greatest.' With a deprecatory gesture, Sangallo took a small pad from his inside pocket and began scribbling on it. ‘ Very well. It might happen your car will arrive before I awake in the morning and so deny me the opportunity to say goodbye. So if you will permit me...’

He tore the sheet off the pad and presented it to Danny. The American looked slightly bewildered. 'Er, sorry. What is it?'

The smile he received was totally lacking in embarrassment, It is your account, gentlemen. Dinner for four - your drinks - the accommodation - the use of facilities. It is all itemised.'

Danny's face was a study. As he stared at the bill, Brett began to chuckle. 'Pay the gentleman, Danny.'

‘Wait wait wait a minute,' Danny muttered. 'Just hold on. Maybe I've no right to be but I'm surprised. Yeah. Maybe even a little disappointed.'

The Count lifted his slim shoulders. ‘ No one regrets the need more than I, signore. No one would be happier if I were able to provide my hospitality free. But these are hard times and to survive one must move with them.'

Danny was staring more closely at the bill. 'It looks as if you're ahead of them. How many lire is this?'

'260,000, signore.'

'260,0001 That's over four hundred bucks I' Danny gazed at Brett. 'Did you buy something? Like a statue or family heirloom?'

'It is not only for the drinks and the food,' Sangallo explained urbanely. 'It is for the privilege of enjoying them in my home.'

It is?' Danny was beginning to show reluctant admiration as he pulled out a wad of notes. 'You've got a line and plenty of style - I'll say that.'

Sangallo took the notes from him, tucked them into his breast pocket, and bowed. Thank you, gendemen. Now I'll say goodnight. I hope you will be comfortable until the car arrives.'

With a lingering glance at the blinking Sidonie, he made for the door. Eyes twinkling, Brett walked across the room with him. 'Sir, it has been a pleasure and an outrage to meet you. The cost of your hospitality has been more than compensated by your charm and presence.'

Both men bowed to one another. As Sangallo went out and the door closed, Brett turned towards Sidonie. 'What was that about Mr Charm?'

She shrugged defiantly. 'So charm costs money. What's money?'

'Ask Danny,' Brett said, glancing at the rueful American. 'Still thinking about those lessons?'

Danny grinned back. 'You know something? I think I could use some after all. That's the best con man I've met.'

Sidonie sniffed and sank back into her chair. 'Stop being so jealous and settle down. Tomorrow's going to be a tough day.'

Half an hour passed. Sidonie, her feet tucked up beneath her, was fast

asleep. Rocco and Danny were dozing: only Brett was wide awake. Feeling like a whisky, he rose quietly and tip-toed across the room. Finding the water jug empty he made for the cloakroom door. A frown crossed his face when he found the door would not open. Alert now he made for the hall door. Behind him Danny was rising inquiringly to his feet. 'What is it?'

Walking quickly across the room Brett pulled aside the curtains of the French windows. 'It seems we're locked up here tighter than the Crown jewels.'

Staring over his shoulder through the glass Danny caught a glimpse of slatted wooden shutters. 'It looks as if you're right.'

The exhausted Sidonie was still asleep but their voices had awakened Rocco. Coming alongside them he followed Danny's eyes and let out a growl of anger. 'Fine. Just fine. You walked us right into this and...'

Danny gave him a push. 'Save it for some other time.'

Rocco half-started towards him, then checked himself. Til do that. Only let's hope there is another time.'

Brett motioned them to keep quiet. In the silence they could hear cars approaching. Through the heavy shutters they saw a huge white limousine moving up the moonlit drive.

'How many?' Danny breathed.

Three,' Brett told him as two more cars came into sight,

They've brought an army,' the American muttered.

Both men turned to study the locked room. Rocco had given Sidonie a shake and she was staring at them with sleep-dazed eyes. 'What is it? Is the car here?'

Trying to break the news gently, Danny grinned. Tou could say that.'

'It's Torino and his hoods,' Rocco said roughly. 'And these two fools have us caged up here like canaries.'

'Some canary,' Danny said with dislike. He turned to Brett. 'Any ideas?'

Brett was staring thoughtfully at the huge statue of Aphrodite alongside the french windows. Danny followed his eyes and reacted. "Think it would work?'

Think of anything better?' Brett countered.

"No, I don't believe I can. OK. Let's try it.'

Sidonie, looking white-faced but resolute, moved alongside them. 'What's the scheme?'

Danny motioned the scowling Rocco closer. 'It has to be timed right or it won't work. So listen and don't miss anything.'

The headlights of the huge Mercedes bathed Sangallo in light as he stood at the gates of the drive. His urbane self had disappeared: he looked pale and nervous. As the car halted he ran round to the rear window where Torino gazed out at him.

'Are they still here?'

'Yes. I've locked them in the living room.'

Torino imperceptibly relaxed. 'Are they armed?'

'I think Rocco has a gun. But not the other three.'

Torino threw open the door. 'J[1]"[11]? inside. You can lead my men to them.'

The Mercedes glided swiftly through the gates and parked at one side of the crescent drive. A belt of trees half-concealed the villa. The other two cars parked close by. Torino jumped out and shouted instructions at the men pouring out of them. Three of them, guns in hand, ran across the moonlit grounds to cut off any possible escape from the rear of the house. The others gathered round while Torino had a quick word with Manetti. He then turned to the nervous Sangallo.

'Show Manetti where you're holding them prisoner. Hurry.'

'You're not coming?' Sangallo asked.

'No. I must stay near the telephone. But you'll find my lieutenant more than capable of handling them.'

Face pale, Sangallo led the expressionless Manetti and his men through the hall to the living room door. Passing over the key, the Count flattened himself nervously against the wall. Motioning his men to cover him with their automatics, Manetti inserted the key and turned it. As his hand closed on the door knob there was a tremendous crash of glass inside the room, followed by the rending of wood. The gangsters stared at one another and then, abandoning caution, threw open the door and ran inside.

Sidonie was straining her ears at the hall door. Across the room Brett, Danny, and Rocco were standing alongside the huge marble statue. The girl heard a sound and made a frantic signal to the two men. Danny put his back to the plinth of the statue; the other two lowered their shoulders and braced themselves.

Faint footsteps could now be heard approaching the door. Looking pale but determined the girl pressed closer to it. Long seconds passed, then she heard a faint clink as a key was inserted in the lock.

She waited a couple of seconds more, then gave an urgent signal. The three men heaved together. The statue swayed a moment, then righted itself. The men braced themselves and heaved again. This time the marble figure swayed and toppled sideways. Its weight sent it smashing through the french windows and the heavy shutters as if they were made of paper. Its head crashed against the stone balustrade that ran round the outside terrace and sent a block of masonry toppling to the grass below. The head, snapped off by the impact, rolled grotesquely along the terrace.

The hall door burst open as the gangsters ran inside. Ahead of them the curtains of the french windows billowed out in the evening breeze, displaying the shattered glass and broken shutters. Manetti stared around the room, saw nobody, and ran to the windows. A moment later all his men were scrambling out after him.

As they disappeared Sangallo hesitantly entered the room. Catching sight of

the damaged statue and showing his distress, he was about to cross over to it when a quizzical voice made him gasp and turn sharply.

'I don't think much of your taxi service!'

Brett appeared at the other side of the settee. Behind him Danny and the other two came out of hiding and at a signal from the Englishman ran out into the hall. Brett approached the alarmed Sangallo, who backed away.

'You do not understand ... If I had not told Torino he would have punished me.'

The man flinched as Brett reached out but it was only to pluck the wad of notes from his breast pocket. 'Sorry,' Brett said dryly. 'But the room service wasn't up to standard.'

Distant shots from the grounds made him turn. About to follow the others, he tore a note from the wad and stuffed it back into the astonished Sangallo's pocket. 'Buy some glue for Aphrodite,' he called as he ran out into the hall. Seeing it was empty he went down the steps of the villa three at a time. As he stood beside a dark clump of shrubbery a hand grabbed his arm and drew him into it. 'What kept you so long?' Danny hissed.

The look Brett gave him was wasted in the darkness. 'A gentleman has to pay his courtesies before leaving.'

Shots rang out again from the far side of the grounds as the startled gangsters fired at shadows. Rocco pushed alongside Danny. 'Where are their cars?'

Danny pointed to the belt of trees that flanked the crescent drive. 'Round the back.'

Rocco parted the shrubbery. 'OK. Head down and let's go. Fast.'

Brett and Danny grabbed hold of Sidonie and ran hell-for-leather through the shrubs for the belt of trees. A dark figure materialized before them and tried to yell a warning. Almost without breaking his stride the tough Rocco flattened him and ran on. They crossed a wide patch of moonlight, reached the trees, and paused a moment in their shadow. 'How many?' Danny breathed as Brett parted a bush.

'Only one. Alongside the Mercedes.'

'OK. I'll take him. You three head for the second car!'

Beside the Mercedes Torino was lighting a cigarette. The flame showed his expression was calm and satisfied. The crash from the house could only have come from his men breaking in, while the shots suggested Rocco and his helpers had put up a fight. In which case they were probably dead. A pity in one way, and yet in another a relief, for it would obviate the need for an execution. Torino allowed himself the luxury of a yawn. In a few minutes he ought to be able to close the case and drive home to bed.

The sudden rush of the four fugitives from the clump of trees caught him by surprise, but only for an instant. As fast as a cat he leapt round and reached inside his jacket for his automatic. On his left Brett, Rocco and Sidonie were running madly for the second of the empty cars, a large Fiat. Danny, his arms

driving like pistons, was making diagonally across the drive straight towards Torino.

Brett grabbed open the rear door of the car and bundled Sidonie inside. Rocco dived in after her. Slamming the door Brett spun anxiously round.

The American was only yards from Torino but the Italian had reached his automatic and was dragging it from his shoulder holster. For Brett the moonlit scene seemed to freeze for a moment, with Torino's gun coming into line and Danny making a frantic bid to close the gap before the gangster could fire.

The scene dissolved into violent action again. As Torino's finger tightened on the trigger, Danny dived headlong and hit the Italian with his shoulder. The automatic went off but the bullet, deflected by Torino's fall, whined harmlessly from the branch of a tree. As the Italian crashed heavily to the drive, the automatic skidded from his hand. Seeing the gangster was winded, Danny grabbed the gun and fired two quick shots into the front tyre of the Mercedes.

On seeing Danny's success Brett leapt into the car and started the engine. As the American ran towards the Fiat he pumped three shots at the third car in line. One bullet struck home and the car slumped forward as a tyre burst. Brett gunned the engine and as the Fiat moved forward Danny jumped in alongside him. 'OK. Let's move,' he panted.

The shots had drawn the attention of Torino's men and three of them ran out on the moonlit drive. Putting his foot down Brett drove straight at them and forced them to dive aside. Cursing they scrambled up and pumped shot after shot at the accelerating car. But the drive swept around more trees as it neared the road and within seconds the Fiat was out of sight.

Refusing assistance Torino was on his feet again. Brushing down his suit, his face pale but disciplined, he nodded at the two damaged cars. 'Get those wheels changed. I want to be after them within five minutes.'

The men ran to obey. As Manetti hesitated, Torino glanced at him shaq^ly. 'What is it? Are you afraid we won't catch them?'

Knowing his man, Manetti spoke with caution. 'Five minutes gives them a good start, padrone.'

Although Torino's voice was quiet, it drained the blood from Manetti's gaunt cheeks. 'I am aware of that. I am also aware that but for your incompetence tonight all four of them would be prisoners or dead. That is something I shall take up with you later. However, their escape is only temporary. They cannot know that the car they took is the slowest of the three. Nor can they know about the road they have taken.'

Manetti started, then showed his relief. 'The road! Of course. Then we are certain to catch them.'

'Certain unless the police should reach them first,' Torino reminded him dxyly. 'So see no time is wasted changing those tyres.'

CHAPTER SIX

With a triumphant hoot of its siren, the train broke out of the long tunnel. As mountains sprang up again round the track and early morning sunlight flooded into the compartment, Judge Fulton glanced at his watch. His expression suggested he was pleased with liimself and life in general.

'They should be well on their way to the frontier by this time.'

Behind his spectacles, Manny Howard looked less confident. 'You mean if they're lucky, don't you?'

The Judge gave the American a tolerant smile. 'Those two are always lucky. They're probably taking the whole trip like a leisurely Sunday afternoon drive.'

The Fiat screamed round the mountain bend like a runaway banshee, its rear wheels skidding no more than three feet from a precipitous drop. Ahead the road unfolded in a series of vicious hairpins as it climbed deeper into the mountains. -The morning was well advanced and sunlight was beginning to creep into the shadowy valleys below.

Tyres screeching, the Fiat went round the first hairpin under full lock. A flock of birds, terrified by the noise, shot into the air and vanished over a stone hedge. Brett's three passengers grabbed their seats and held on as a moment later Brett put on opposite lock. Danny grinned appreciat-ingly. 'Not bad. Maybe you brake a little early but not bad.'

In the American's hands were a pair of binoculars and an automatic he had discovered in the glove compartment of the Fiat. Behind him, unperturbed by the violent ride, Sidonie was reloading her camera. Rocco, a road map on his knee, was struggling to locate their position. As the Fiat came out of another hairpin he leaned forward and tapped Brett's shoulder.

'I think I've got it.'

Danny reached back. 'Show me.'

Pointing at the map, Rocco handed it to him. 'If I'm right there's no turn-off from this road for over fifteen miles.'

Sidonie glanced up from her camera. 'The way he drives, who needs roads?'

Brett smiled at her quip. Danny glanced up from the map. 'He's right. All they have to do is follow their noses.'

Ahead, on the outer bend of a mountain shoulder, a site had been cut awa[y to allow parking and appreciation of the panoramic view. Brett drove into it and braked. 'Let's take a look.'

He and Dannyl jumped out and stood on the low stone wall that bounded the site. Below them the brown scar of road zig-zagged upwards. Danny's binoculars fixed on a moving cloud of dust. He handed the glasses to Brett. The Englishman focused diem and two cars leapt into view. The leading one was a white Mercedes and it was travelling at speed. Brett hahded the glasses back ruefully to Danny.

'They're nearer! than I thought. No more than three minutes away.'

'Want me to drive?' Danny asked innocently.

Giving him a withering look Brett jumped back into the driver's seat. Before following him Danny swung his glasses on the road ahead. He gave a start as Brett revved up the engine. 'Whoa!'

Catching his expression Brett jumped out again. Tou do realize you're wasting valuable time?'

Without a word Danny offered him the glasses and pointed. A mile ahead, where the contour road swung round another mountain shoulder, a police car blocked the road. Grouped alongside it were a number of policemen and motorcycles. Danny grimaced as Brett lowered the glasses.

We won't talk our way through that.'

'How are your feet?' Brett asked as they started towards the Fiat.

'Terrified,' the American groaned.

Sidonie lowered her window. 'What's the trouble?'

'Everyone out,' Brett told her. 'Time for your morning exercise.'

As Danny and Rocco helped the girl up the steep mountainside Brett kept watch on the approaching dust cloud. As it moved round the last but one hairpin, he had an idea and ran back to the Fiat. Releasing its handbrake, he pushed against the door frame in an attempt to steer the car backwards. Danny, thirty feet up the mountainside, realized his intention and came sliding down with a rattle of stones. Bracing his back against the radiator, he shoved with his legs while Brett steered. The Fiat ran out on to the road where Brett centred the wheels and applied the handbrake.

The screech of tyres and the revving of engines was close now as the pursuing cars reached the last hairpin. His hand on the brake, Brett watched the road bend two hundred yards away. As the white Mercedes appeared he gave Danny a yell and released the handbrake. Danny heaved and the Plat began rolling downhill. Brett ran with it for a few yards to make certain its wheels were correctly centered. Satisfied, he slammed the door and ran back to Danny. A few seconds later the two men were scrambling up the mountainside.

The frantic squeal of brakes made them both turn. The driver of the Mercedes had realized his danger but there was no stopping the runaway Fiat. It collided into the half-turned Mercedes with a crash of glass and rending of metal, cannoned off and caught the following car a similar glancing blow. When the dust settled all three cars could be seen locked together. While it was apparent none of them was seriously damaged, it was equally apparent it would be some time before the road was cleared. As the two men watched the gangsters climbing out of the cars, Sidonie shouted at them from a clump of bushes above.

'Which way do we go?'

Giving Brett a wry glance Danny began climbing towards her. 'Take a bearing on the Pole Star.'

'But it's daylight,' the girl wailed.

Danny grinned. 'It is ? Then use your watch and the sun.'

'How?'

Danny opened his mouth, paused comically, then turned to Brett. 'How would I know? You were the Boy Scout. Tell the girl!'

The man hiding in the clump of boulders nudged his companion's arm and pointed downwards. The mountainside shelved steeply down through a tangle of bushes and rocks to a narrow sheep path. Four small figures had come into sight and were trudging wearily along it. One, a girl, looked extremely tired and every now and then had to be helped over obstacles on the path. Apart from an empty sheep pen made of stone and turf, the countrvside looked barren and hostile.

The first man studied the party a moment through binoculars, then swung round a walkie-talkie he carried on his back. The instructions he received through it made his face tighten and he nodded at his companion. The second man reached out for a high-powered rifle and slid it carefully through the rocks. As he lowered his cheek and squinted down the sights, the silence was broken only by the heavy anticipatory breathing of the man alongside him.

Brett and Danny, hot and tired, were the first to reach the sheep pen. As Danny sank down with his back against the stones, Brett pulled the map out from his pocket. 'We've still quite a way to go.'

'Walking?' Danny asked.

'No, running,' Brett said sarcastically.

Danny jerked a thumb down the path where Sidonie had paused before a broken stile. 'Sid's not going to make it.'

'I don't know. She's holding up pretty well.'

Danny nodded. 'Yeah. But how long d'you think she'll last when she's carrying me.'

Back along the path Rocco had reached the exhausted Sidonie and was helping her over the stile. Both Danny and Brett reacted at the unexpected gallantry.

'An officer and a gentleman,' Brett said.

Danny waited until Rocco had almost reached them, then stared at him reflectively. 'You know something? Under that veneer of brutality and aggression - deep down where it counts - I'll bet there's a ...'

'Go on,' Brett encouraged.

'A rat.' Danny concluded, grinning up at the scowling Rocco.

Sidonie, dusty and dishevelled, slumped down against the stone wall. 'That's it, fellas. This far and no further. Beat. Done. Kaput. If I was a horse you'd shoot me.'

'Oh, come on,' Brett said. 'In England we take a brisk little walk like this before tea,'

The girl closed her eyes. 'Bully for old England. Only this is where Sid opts out. Not another step.'

There was a distant crack and rock splinters flew from the stone alongside the girl's head. The effect on the party was electric. Danny and Brett grabbed Sidonie, and the four of them scrambled frantically round the back of the pen as more shots rained in.

As the gunfire echoed back from the hills, Rocco turned urgently to Brett. 'We gotta move out of here fast or they'll send someone round to flank us.'

Below the sheep pen the hillside dropped steeply towards a fast-moving stream. Danny pushed Sidonie forward. 'Down there they can't see us.'

The girl gave a heartfelt groan as she started the steep climb. 'Maybe I'd rather be shot. At least it's quick.'

'For someone keen to die, you ducked for cover pretty sharply,' Danny grinned.

That was reflex action. My mind's too stupid to know my body's had enough.' The girl stumbled over a root and paused. 'Isn't there another way of getting to the frontier without walking twice round the world?'

'You nearly found one a moment ago,' Danny said, pushing her on. Sidonie turned to Brett who was holding her other arm. 'You're the one that's supposed to have respect for a girl's feelings. Haven't you noticed I'm down to my kneecaps?'

Brett glanced down, eyes twinkling. 'Some kneecaps.'

'This isn't the moment for charm, Brett Sinclair. If someone doesn't find me another kind of transport soon, I'm finding one myself. On one of your backs!'

Danny winced. 'Now let's not get hasty ...'

Brett nodded. 'Correct, Daniel. In all things there must be moderation.' He pointed down the valley where a dusty brown road could be seen crossing it. 'We'll make for that road and see what we can find.'

The two bicycles lay together on the roadside. The handlebars of one were tilted lovingly over the saddle of the other. From the clump of pines forty yards back from the road low, feminine giggles could be heard. They were repeated at irregular intervals for the next fifteen minutes before a young teenage couple emerged from the trees. The boy, looking extremely pleased with himself, had his arm round the waist of a flushed, bright-eyed girl.

They drifted reluctantly back to the road, stopping every few yards for a kiss. It was only when they reached the grassy verge that they realized their bicycles had vanished. Looking puzzled, then indignant, they stared up and down the dusty road. They were just in time to see the bicycles vanishing at speed around a distant bend.

Brett was pedalling the first one with Sidonie riding on the handlebars. Giving a sigh of contentment she stretched out her legs and leaned back against Brett's chest.

'Why didn't we do this before? This is living.'

'Particularly uphill,' Brett agreed.

Danny was pedalling the second bicycle, with Rocco on the pillion. He showed his disgust as he came alongside. 'We're taking turns, remember? I'm not giving this hood a free ride all the way to the frontier.'

Brett gave him a chiding glance. 'Where's your pride? It's an honour to carry the heavier load.'

'Don't con me,' Danny growled. 'Another mile and this hood's yours!'

As the road levelled out from the bend it began climbing a shallow hill, silencing both men as they put their weight on the pedals. By the time they reached the crest, sweat was pouring freely from them. As Danny was about to launch a fresh complaint, Brett lifted an arm and pointed.

'Salvation ahead, Daniel.'

An old farmhouse stood at the bottom of the hill with an equally dilapidated truck on the road outside. Dismounting, the four fugitives approached cautiously. Seeing no one about they leaned the bicycles against a stone wall and moved furtively towards the truck. Danny walked round it in some wonder. 'Built 1870 and still going strong. Reckon two bicycles are a fair swop, don't you?'

'They might be if they were ours,' Sidonie said.

Brett motioned them to keep quiet and to jump into the cab. As Rocco prepared to leap into the open back he caught an overpowering whiff of manure and ran round to join Sidonie and Danny. Danny eyed him maliciously. 'You're getting fastidious all of a sudden, aren't you?'

Brett gingerly pressed the starter. As the engine wheezed into life a huge farmer carrying a pitchfork appeared in the doorway of a barn. Gesticulating wildly, he began running after them. With the truck slow on acceleration it appeared for a minute he might catch them but just in time it pulled away, leaving him dancing with rage in the middle of the road. Danny let out a breath of relief. 'A pitchfork through my gizzard is all I needed.'

The old truck struggled up the hill and gained momentum on the other side. Ahead another mountain range appeared. Half an hour later the four fugitives were well into it. Spectacular views appeared as the road contoured the steep valleys. To the west the sun was setting low over the peaks.

With the truck miraculously negotiating the high passes, Danny and Brett were looking progressively more confident. Danny took a glance at his watch. 'This must be some kind of record. We can't have more than five miles to go.'

Sidonie, who to gain more air had taken the seat at the window, glanced back as the truck rounded a hairpin. Her rueful voice made all three men stare at her.

'Fellas - I know you'll think I'm just an old worrier, but there are two awfully familiar cars back there.'

Danny twisted round and gazed over the open back of the truck. 'She's right. They're harder to get rid of than dry rot.'

'If we've only five miles to go, can't we out-run them?' Rocco asked.

'In this old crock?' Brett asked derisively.

Danny, who had been busy marking the map with a pencil, handed it: to Rocco. 'We'll drop you off at the next bend and pick you up later. I've marked a rendezvous. You can easily make five miles on foot.'

Sidonie let out a yelp of alarm. 'Now hold it a minute, Danny Wilde!'

'It's the only way, Sid,' Brett told her. 'It's vital you and Rocco get away and it's not going to make things any worse for us. We'll give them a run around for a while and then join you at midnight or thereabouts.'

'How can you join us? You've just said you can't out-run them.'

Brett swung the truck round a hairpin and braked. 'Come on - out. They mustn't see you leave.'

Before the girl could argue any more, Rocco threw open the door and pushed her out. A few seconds later, with Sidonie still struggling, the two of them vanished among the rocks and bushes. The truck was moving forward again as Danny closed the door. Seeing die American glance back, Brett tried to reassure him. 'Don't worry. They'll make it all right.'

Danny turned back, a comical expression on his face. 'Who's worried about them? Stop underestimating me. I'm worried about *us.'*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Mercedes was travelling at speed as it thundered past the spot where Rocco and Sidonie were hiding. Stones from its tyres rattled into the bushes. The second car, packed with men, went past only seconds later. As the cars disappeared round a bend Sidonie rose to her feet. She looked pale and anxious.

'Do you think they'll catch them?'

Rocco's shrug was non-committal. 'We'll know in a couple of hours. Let's start walking.'

Inside the farm truck Brett and Danny were bouncing up and down as if on a trampoline. 'Excellent for the liver,' Brett murmured as all four wheels crashed down together.

Danny felt his teeth gingerly. 'I've a feeling I've lost my toothpaste smile.' He glanced back. 'They've fallen for it -they're still coming.'

Brett's foot went down the last half-inch to the floorboards. 'Good. Then let's make a real chase of it.'

Tyres burning, the old truck thundered over a narrow bridge, rocked around an S bend, and plunged into a shallow valley. Grazing goats, startled by the din, scattered and bounded away for shelter among the rocks. The road surface was deteriorating, sharp stones taking the place of dusty macadam. As they rattled against the truck's underside there was a loud crack and the vehicle began lurching drunkenly. As Brett fought the wheel, Danny grabbed his seat and held on. 'You were saying ...' he quipped.

With the off-side front tyre flat, Brett slithered to the roadside. Behind them the white Mercedes was already entering the valley. As Brett was about to switch off the engine Danny noticed a small shepherd's hut a couple of hundred yards up the hillside. 'Think we can make it?'

Brett revved the engine and the crippled truck struggled upwards. Fifty yards from the hut a barrier of boulders and bushes forced the two men to leap out. As they scrambled over the boulders and ran for the hut, the Mercedes and its companion car swung off the road and came jolting upwards. They came alongside the abandoned truck at the same time Danny and Brett reached the hut. A couple of shots rang out as the two men dived through the half-open door.

Panting, they gazed around the derelict hut. Most of its roof had fallen in and beams criss-crossed the floor. The two windows, both on the same side of the hut, were only shattered frames. The sun-bleached door hung askew on its hinges. Dusty cobwebs were everywhere and the earthen floor was littered with sheep droppings.

Danny reached into the pocket of his slacks and tossed a second automatic at Brett. The Englishman showed his surprise.

'Where are all these guns coming from?'

'I get 'em wholesale,' Danny grinned. He took a look from one of the shattered windows and reacted. 'Here they come.'

Brett ran to the other window and peered out. Torino could be seen standing alongside his car, which was just out of pistol range, but his henchmen were moving forward cautiously through the rocks and bushes. 'Wait,' Danny cautioned.

Brett nodded. For twenty yards around the hut the ground had been cleared of boulders and the bushes were too small to give protection. Beyond that, cover was plentiful and under the orders of Manetti their assailants were making full use of it. From the glimpses Brett had of them as they ran from bush to bush it was clear that they were spreading out into a wide arc.

There was a pause as the men reached the limit of their cover. In the silence Brett could hear the evening breeze rustling dry leaves. The sun was almost down but with its rays slanting along the valley the light was still good.

A sudden shot rang out. It was followed by a crackling volley as under its cover the gangsters made a rush for the hut.

Squeezed alongside their respective windows, Danny and Brett fired back as bullets penetrated the hut and ricocheted round the stone walls. For a few seconds the valley echoed and re-echoed to the thunder of gunfire. Then Danny let out a yell of triumph. 'They're going back.'

Brett saw he was right. Their assailants were already running for cover among the rocks and bushes. One was seen to be limping badly before he dropped from sight. Danny gave a satisfied chuckle. 'I got one of 'em.'

Brett sighed. 1 wish you'd try not to exaggerate. I hit that man as he was making for the door.'

The American gave a laugh of derision. 'You! Don't give me that. He was coming right for my window when I plugged him. How many shells have you got left?'

Brett checked his magazine. 'Three. And you?'

'Two.'

Brett shrugged. 'Then we'd better prepare to die like gentlemen. Like a quick lesson?'

'Funny, funny,' Danny grunted, peering from his window again.

He could see four of the men gathered round Torino receiving fresh instructions. Gesturing for them to wait, the gangleader entered the Mercedes. Brett moved up alongside Danny.

"What's going on?'

'He's using his telephone,' the American told him. 'Think he's calling up more hoods?'

'He might be.'

'He's a hero, isn't he. What's he want - an army?'

You should be flattered,' Brett grinned. He moved towards the broken door and examined it. 'If we're under seige we'd better lower the drawbridge. What about a hand?'

Selecting two of the fallen beams, they jammed the door tightly against its frame. Danny stood back, looking doubtful. 'Think it'll hold?'

'About two minutes,' Brett told him. 'But it's a nice gesture of defiance.'

Sidonie paused for breath on the steep mountainside. Over in the west the sky was aflame as the sun began sinking behind a distant peak. She turned to Rocco who, like herself, was breathing heavily. 'Do you think we've crossed the frontier yet?' The tough Rocco shrugged. 'It's hard to say. It's a smuggler's route and there aren't any frontier posts. But we can't be far away.'

He was staring back the way they had come. The girl noticed his expression with some surprise. 'You're worried about them, aren't you?'

A shutter seemed to fall over the man's face as he turned to her. 'About them? You've got to be kidding.'

'I think you are,' she said. 'Do you think they're going to be all right?'

The man took another glance at the shadow-filled valley. 'How should I know? Probably. They're not the mugs I took them for.'

Standing alongside Danny, Brett was watching the gang of men grouped around the white Mercedes. The sun had vanished at last and dusk was welling up from the valley. To the east, where the sky had faded, a milky wash showed behind the mountains and Brett nodded his satisfaction. 'We're lucky there'll be a moon later on.'

'With five rounds between us, I wouldn't call us lucky if someone rigged up arc lights,' Danny grumbled.

"When your ammunition's low, the correct drill is not to fire until you can

see the whites of their eyes,' Brett reminded him.

"Whites? Are you kidding? I'll bet those bozos haven't a clear eye between them.'

Two more minutes passed by and then Danny nudged Brett's arm. 'Man your guns. Here they come again.'

Brett ran back to his window. Doubling low, four of the hoods were running from bush to bush. Thirty seconds more and a volley of shots rang out, followed by the pound of footsteps.

Fire lanced out from the window frames as Brett and Danny fired off the last of their shells. Then, as bullets tore through the open windows, they turned to one another and sank down with their backs to the wall. Brett gave a fatalistic shrug.

' 'That", as they say, "is that"!'

Danny made a commendable impersonation of Oliver Hardy. 'Another fine mess you've got us into, Stanley.'

Brett glanced round ruefully as a bullet, glancing wickedly round the stone walls, buried itself in a crate alongside him. 'I shouldn't worry. This is the point where the Fifth Cavalry always move in.'

'I wouldn't count on it. They're too busy making movies these days.'

The shots entering the hut suddenly ceased. Brett turned reflectively towards Danny. 'You know, my great, great grandfather was once in a spot like this.'

'He was?'

'Mmmmm. In India. He was cut off from his Regiment, out of ammunition, and surrounded by about ten thousand tribesmen.'

'Just like us,' Danny agreed.

'Right. And you know what he did?'

Tell me, tell me. I've got to know.'

'He drew his sword, and completely alone walked out to face them.'

'Imagine that. The old boy had what it takes. What happened then?'

Brett looked puzzled. Then?'

'Sure. He went for them with his sword. Alone. What next?'

'Why, they killed him. He died bravely, of course.'

Danny turned away in disgust. 'Great. Just great. You'd be a comfort to a guy falling from a plane without a parachute.'

Brett, looking puzzled, motioned for silence. They're taking a long time, aren't they?'

Danny jumped up and stared out of a window. As Brett joined him he heard the sound of a revving engine. To their astonishment the two men saw the Mercedes begin to move downhill while the remaining gangsters climbed hurriedly into the second car. A few seconds later both cars were accelerating back to the road Danny stared at Brett in disbelief.

' Now why would they quit when they were winning?'

Brett motioned for silence again. In the distance a siren was wailing

urgently. Danny's eyes widened 'I'm dreaming this,' he breathed.

Hardly able to believe their luck they watched Torino's two cars vanish into the dusk while, at the other end of the valley, a flashing light appeared. The light swung off the road and headlights blazed on as the police car probed the rocks and bushes. They switched off as the car halted alongside the abandoned truck. Danny let out a howl of triumph and slapped Brett across the shoulders. 'We've done it. I can't figure out how, but we have.'

" They ran to the door to pull away the supporting beams. Brett's voice had a satisfied sound. 'Rocco and Sid ought to be high and dry by this time.'

Danny nodded brightly. 'And with a good lawyer, you and me oughtn't to get more than two or three years.'

Footsteps sounded outside and a moment later the door was pushed open by three armed policemen. Danny greeted them with a broad grin. 'Marvellous, you guys. I don't know how you did it but it's tremendous.'

Saying something in Italian, one of the policemen held out his hand for their automatics. As they were passed over, the other two moved deeper into the shadowy hut and scrutinized it carefully. Danny, as bouncy and buoyant as an Alsatian puppy, followed them.

'You made it like the movies - just in time. How did you know we were here? Did someone tip you off?'

One of the policemen smiled at a colleague. Danny slapped him on the shoulder. 'However it happened, you're the greatest. Remind me to buy half a dozen tickets for the next policemen's ball. And you can put another twenty down for my friend here. He's loaded and ...'

Brett's level voice cut off his prattle as if it were snipped by a pair of scissors. 'Danny, I think there's something you should know. Take a look at the door.'

Danny swung round and gaped. Leaning against the doorframe, a pistol in his hand and a smile of triumph on his face, was Torino. He moved forward almost apologetically. 'Good evening, gentlemen. After your spirited stand I hope you do not find my appearance too disappointing.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Holding his automatic almost casually, Torino approached the motionless Danny and Brett. His manner was deceptively courteous. 'It seemed pointless to risk lives when less violent ways could show better returns. You will admit my little trick has worked perfectly.'

'Perfectly,' Brett conceded.

Torino glanced at one of the uniformed men. 'Keep watch outside.' He turned back to his two captives. 'I congratulate you. You've given me a hard time.'

Brett bowed coolly. 'We try to please.'

The gangleader's eyes travelled round the shadowy hut. 'And it would seem you have had some success. No Rocco.'

‘ No Rocco,' Danny said with relish. 'He's over the border by this time.'

'Ah, yes. The midnight rendezvous.' When both men showed their surprise, the Italian inclined his head. 'You shouldn't be surprised. We have a most efficient intelligence network. However, one detail is not known to me - the actual meeting place. Once I know that, I have plenty of time to reach him.'

The two men glanced at one another, raised their eyebrows comically, then shook their heads. Their byplay changed the mood of the Italian. Face hard, he nodded at his men who moved to either side of the two captives and dug their automatics into their ribs. Torino moved nearer, his cold eyes setding on Brett.

'Don't deceive yourselves. You will tell me what I want to know.'

'Who's deceiving who?' Danny asked uneasily as the Italian's automatic steadied on Brett.

'Whom,' Brett corrected coolly.

Torino's voice had a spine-chilling quality. You do know that even minor bullet wounds can be very painful?'

'He's bluffing,' Brett said.

There was a sharp crack and Brett's thick brown hair parted. The unperturbed Englishman smiled wryly. 'He's not bluffing.'

Torino moved a foot nearer. 'That time the hair ... I ask you again. Where is Rocco?'

'You think he's worth it?' Danny asked desperately.

There's Sid too,' Brett reminded him.

In the silence a fly could be heard buzzing in a web. Behind the automatic sights Torino's eyes were flat and ruthless. 'I shall count to three. No more. Where is Rocco. One ... two ...'

A harsh voice from the door made all five men stiffen. 'I'm right here. No, Torino. Don't turn round.'

Facing the Italian, both Danny and Brett could see the rugged figure of Rocco framed in the doorway, a revolver trained on the three gangsters. 'Drop those guns,' he growled. 'Fast now - fast.'

All three automatics thudded to the floor. As Danny and Brett grabbed them, Rocco moved a few feet into the hut, still behind Torino. You should have brought all your gunmen back, Torino. And you shouldn't use sleepy guard dogs. Yours is out for the night.’

Danny looked bewildered. 'I don't get it. Why did you come back for us?'

'It's not that simple,' Rocco grunted. His tone changed. ‘ You two want to stay here until the other hoods come looking for them? Get them tied up - use that rope over there.'

As Danny and Brett started on the two henchmen, Rocco jabbed his revolver into Torino's back. 'OK. Turn round.'

The prod of the gun seemed to break the spell that gripped the Italian and he

obeyed. His gasp of shock made both Danny and Brett spin round. 'Santa Maria 1 I don't understand... You are not Frank Rocco.'

A triumphant smile cracked the man's grim face. Danny looked almost as astonished as Torino. 'What d'you mean? Of course he's Rocco. We've hauled him all over Italy.'

Before Rocco could reply Brett answered for him, his tone both amused and rueful. 'You're Manny Howard, aren't you? The man from the American Embassy?'

Howard turned to him. 'Right. Getting Rocco out of Italy seemed impossible, so the Judge suggested he and I traded identities. The Judge figured you two would carve up a trail that everyone would follow. And that's how it went.'

Danny was looking thunderstruck. 'You're telling me that Fulton and Rocco have been travelling first-class all this time? With no one after them?'

'That's, right,' Howard grinned. 'Sorry I couldn't let you in on it. But as long as you believed I was Rocco, it looked real.'

Danny was almost choking with indignation. 'Then how come you gave me such a hard time?'

'I've told you. I had to stay in character.'

Brett had to grab Danny's arm as the American started belligerently forward. 'You know something? I ought to bust you. Wide open.'

'Later,' Howard grinned. 'We've still a bit more travelling to do. The Judge and Rocco will want to say goodbye.' They finished tying up their prisoners and prepared to leave by police car. As Howard, the last to leave the hut, reached the door, Torino's voice checked him. The gang leader's face was pale and thin with malice.

Tell Rocco something for me. Tell him we have many friends in the United States - men of great influence. He might escape this time but he must not think he is safe. I give him my word his life will be a very temporary event.'

The field in which the car and helicopter were standing was warm and peaceful in the morning sunlight. The idling blades of the helicopter sent ripples through the long grass. Through the side windows two men could be seen seated behind the pilot. Manny Howard and the real Frank Rocco were already aboard waiting to be transported to an American jet and the States. The last passenger, Judge Fulton, was saying his farewells to Brett, Danny and Sidonie. The tliree men were standing by the car: Sidonie was twenty yards away, still indef atigably taking her photographs.

The elderly Judge looked elated by the success of his mission as he extended his hand to the American. 'On reflection I know you'll realize there was no other way, Danny. So no hard feelings?'

Danny pretended to hesitate before taking his hand. 'If there aren't, it's only due to my forgiving nature.'

Fulton laughed and turned to Brett. 'I can't thank you both enough for what

you've done. Use my car to get back to Rome and I will see you on my return.'

'Don't kill yourself hurrying,' Danny said.

With another laugh, the Judge climbed aboard the helicopter. Motioning at Danny, Manny Howard leaned out before the door closed. 'Don't get the idea I'm running out on that fight, tough guy. But duty comes before pleasure.'

Danny grinned back. 1 think you're smart. But I'll run up with you one of these days.'

The roar of the helicopter's engine drowned Howard's reply. As the door closed and the blades spun faster, Brett and Danny withdrew to Sidonie, still shooting photographs. Shouting at her Danny pointed at the camera and shook his head. Puzzled, she put her ear to his lips. From his gestures it was obvious he was trying to tell her about the deception but her reaction indicated little success. It was only when the helicopter rose from the field and veered away that he began to get through. The girl's expression turned into one of shocked disbelief.

'You're telling me that all I've got are pictures of you guys and an American agent?'

Danny nodded. 'Yeah. We were fooled too.'

'But I took hundreds of shots,' the girl wailed. 'Hundreds ! And now they mean nothing.'

Danny looked hurt. 'Nothing, honey?' He flashed his teeth at her. 'You've still got the toothpaste ads.'

Sympathetically, the two men watched the girl drift dejectedly towards the car. 'Oh, come on, Sid,' Brett urged. 'It's not that bad. Come to think of it, it's rather funny.'

She threw them a glance of dislike. Yeah. Very funny.'

She climbed slowly into the car. With a look at Brett, Danny started towards her. 'Come on, kid. Where's your sense of humour?'

With an unexpected roar, the car burst into life. As it shot forward the two startled men braced themselves to leap aside. Instead it halted alongside them with a squeal of brakes. Danny put a hand to his heart. Brett gave a relieved sigh.

'For an awful moment I thought you were going to leave us standing here. With the nearest town twenty miles away.'

Sidonie looked both hurt and surprised. 'Now why would I do a thing like that?'

'Of course you wouldn't,' Danny assured her as both men moved round to the opposite door. 'It's just that we've had a trying night and our nerves are a bit shaken. Take care of us for a couple of days and we should be fine.'

Take care of you,' the girl said. 'Now that *is* funny.' Before either man could reach for the door, she revved the engine and the car went off across the field like a rocket. The wail from the two stranded men came in unison, 'Sid!!!'

For a moment the car slowed down and Sidonie's mocking voice drifted back. 'Come on, you guys. Where's *your* sense of humour?'

Both men began running frantically. 'Sid!'

The girl waited a few seconds, then shot away again. Turning the car up a narrow track she climbed to a hilltop. On the field below two tiny figures were still gesticulating wildly. With a final glance and an amused laugh, the girl accelerated and vanished over the hill.

SOMEONE LIKE ME

Based on the screenplay
by Terry Nation

CHAPTER ONE

Scott Maskell stood gazing from the penthouse window. Before him was a panoramic view of London. Glass and concrete skyscrapers towered between parks and centuries-old buildings. The dome of St Paul's could be seen glinting in the sunlight. The Thames shone brightly as it wound its way towards the haze-smudged reaches of London Pool. The traffic resembled endless columns of beetles threading their way through the labyrinth of streets.

Maskell turned from the window. He was a good-looking man of average height and build. His suit was superbly cut and in impeccable taste: his manner was urbane and sophisticated. To all the high-powered executives who had dealings with him, foreign and British alike, Scott Maskell seemed to incorporate all the qualities that have made the English public school system famous.

The room he moved across was luxuriously furnished. Although an office, it possessed no large desk or other obvious seat of power. Everything from the modern chairs to the elaborate videotape recording machine, from the deep pile carpets to the ceiling with its subtle lighting, suggested a room where influence was so potent it could safely be made unostentatious.

The motif that dominated the room betrayed the sinews of that influence. Models of ships, ranging from three-masters to passenger liners, from tea clippers to oil Every oil painting on the walls above them, with one excep-Every oil painting on the walls above them, with one exception, was of some kind of marine craft.

The exception, the largest painting in the room, hung in a prominent position near the videotape recorder. It was of a man in his middle sixties, silver-haired and almost benevolent in expression. Yet the artist had caught something more than benevolence in his subject, for the eyes, mouth and chin depicted a man of exceptional will and character.

Scott Maskell walked towards this painting and for a few seconds gazed up at it as if he had not seen it a thousand times already. Then, with a shrug that

could have denoted anything from disdain to admiration, he crossed the room to a small, elegant table he used as a desk. Sitting down he opened a drawer and pulled out a small revolver and a box of shells. Breaking open the revolver he began filling the empty chambers with careful precision. As he finished the task and returned the box of shells into the drawer, there was a tap on the door and a woman appeared. She was thirty-five and very beautiful with blonde hair that hung down past her shoulders. Her clothes had none of the anonymity associated with secretaries in her high position: hers were fashionable and clearly expensive. Her manner was cool and efficient and her English accent as upper-class as Maskell's own.

'Mr Alton is here, Mr Maskell.'

Maskell showed immediate pleasure. 'Good. Good. Ask him to come in, will you, Miss Lindsay?'

As the secretary nodded and went out, he put the loaded revolver on the table and crossed the room to greet his visitor. David Alton, who appeared in the doorway a moment later, was a man in his late thirties and wearing a suit that had seen better days. His accent as he greeted Maskell told he came from a better background than his appearance suggested, but his nervousness showed he was intimidated by the opulence of his surroundings and by Maskell's success. Nevertheless Maskell's greeting could not have been warmer as he held out his hand.

'It's good to see you, David. It really is. How are you?'

Alton managed a smile as he shook hands. I'm all right. It's nice to see you, Scott.'

Holding his arm affectionately, Maskell led him towards the table on which the revolver was resting. 'Come in and make yourself comfortable. How long has it been? Five years? Or six?'

'Quite a while,' Alton muttered, sinking into the chair Maskell offered him. 'In fact it was rather a surprise to hear from you.'

Maskell nodded regretfully. 'I've thought about you often enough but the opportunities weren't there. But when this job came up, naturally you were my first choice. To be honest I'd hoped we'd have been able to meet last week.'

Alton refused the cigar Maskell offered him. 'I was sorry about that too. But I've been in hospital.'

'So you said in your letter. It wasn't anything serious, was it?'

'Not really. I had concussion.' Alton's smile was diffident. To be honest I don't remember much about it.'

"What does it matter? You're out now and you're here -that's the important thing.'

"What exactly is the job?' Alton asked curiously.

He received a hearty clap on the shoulder. 'Oh, we'll get to that in a minute. We've got lots of old times to talk over first. Let me get you a drink. What about a dry sherry? I've got something rather special.'

'Yes; that'll be fine.'

Maskell moved across the room to a cabinet on which stood decanters and crystal glasses. His back was to Alton as he began pouring the drinks. Half-turning his head, he raised a decanter and gave a laugh. 'Our associates and clients like it so much we take the entire output of a bodega in Sanlucar de Barrameda.'

Turning back to the cabinet he did not see Alton's expression. The man's face had started to twitch and his eyelids to flicker uncontrollably. As Maskell's voice rambled on, his hands lifted and pressed on his temples.

It's a tiny place, of course, but as far as I know it's the only wine that's still shipped in amphora. Of course, it should be drunk only when it's severely chilled.'

Alton's eyelids were now blinking grotesquely and his mouth was contorted. At the cabinet, Maskell had filled one glass and was commencing on the second. 'Although, to be honest, my own palate isn't as discerning as it might be. And in any case I always feel it has quite a different bouquet when one drinks it straight from the cask in the bodega.'

Maskell topped up the second glass, lowered the decanter, and turned towards his guest with a smile. It was a smile that turned into a look of astonishment and then fear. David Alton was standing not ten feet away with the loaded revolver in his hand. His face was no longer twitching: it now resembled an expressionless mask and the revolver was pointing straight at Maskell's chest. With a sherry glass in his hand, Maskell took a protesting step forward. Before he could speak, Alton fired once and then, with deliberate care, twice more. Maskell jerked, his knees buckled and he fell forward. An arm twitched, then he lay motionless, the sherry from the glass soaking into the carpet.

The sight appeared to bring feeling back to Alton. His face registered dazed shock and his eyes began twitching rapidly again. He stared down at Maskell's body and then at the revolver in his hand. With a look of horror he dropped the gun on the carpet and began backing slowly towards the door, his eyes held by the motionless figure. Groping behind him for the door handle, he backed into the small office outside. Miss Lindsay, entering with a sheaf of papers in her hand, halted at his look of distress.

'What's the matter, Mr Alton?'

The trembling man could hardly speak for shock. 'He's dead ... I've killed him.'

Miss Lindsay's eyes widened and moved to the closed communicating door. At her look of disbelief, Alton's voice rose hysterically. 'Don't you understand what I'm saying? I've killed him.'

When she still did not react, Alton grabbed her by the arm, threw the door open, and shoved her inside. 'Look. Do you believe me now?'

The woman gazed round the room, then turned back to the trembling man. At her expression, now one of total bewilderment, Alton pushed past her, only to give a gasp of disbelief. The sherry glass lay at the foot of the cabinet but

Maskell's body had disappeared. Totally confused, Alton took a few steps into the apparently empty room. 'But I killed him, I tell you! I shot him with that revolver.'

A sudden chuckle made both of them turn sharply. A high-backed swivel chair was turning towards them and a moment later Maskell appeared with a telephone on his lap. Very much alive, he gave Alton a cheerful smile before lowering his head to the receiver again.

'Yes, absolutely perfect. I'm totally confident we can go ahead as planned. Goodbye.'

Replacing the receiver, he rose from the chair and crossed over to Alton. His manner was enthusiastic and radiated amicability. Clapping the dazed man on the shoulder, he turned towards the wine cabinet. 'Now, how about that drink, old man! Sherry, I think you said?'

Danny straightened up from the large wicker basket that stood near the plate glass window. 'How long are you going to be away?'

Brett was busy packing a leather suitcase he had slung onto a chaise longue. It was already almost filled with clothes and he was laying a couple of documents on top of them. His expression was that of a man going on a trip and trying to remember what he had forgotten. His preoccupation showed in his delay in answering Danny.

"What did you say?'

1 asked how long you were going to be away?'

'Oh, not more than six days.' Brett moved over to a bureau and fingered through another pile of documents. 'Believe me, I'm staying no longer than I have to.'

The spacious elegant room was part of Brett's London apartment. Its decor and furniture, a subde blending of new and old, reflected the Englishman's good taste.

Danny leaned over the wicker basket again and hauled out a full length cloak and top hat. Brett stared at him with some irritation. 'Will you stop unpacking that basket? The van will be here in a minute.'

Danny studied the cape with some admiration. 'You really giving all this stuff away?'

Brett carried another handful of documents to his suitcase. 'The jumble sale is a new idea to raise funds. They're running a kind of auction and they particularly asked for some of the family's Edwardian and Victorian clothes.'

Danny was enjoying the cloak. 'Who'd this belong to?'

Brett threw it a brief glance. 'It looks like my great grandfather's.'

'What was he? A conjurer or something?'

Before Brett could answer Danny had the cape round his shoulders and the top hat on his head. With smiles at an imaginary audience and histrionic flourishes of the cape, he advanced on the long-suffering Brett. Reaching behind the Englishman's head he produced a deck of cards, at the same time

indulging in a conjurer's patter. 'It's amazing! It's baffling! It's magic! The man must be in league with the devil.'

He grinned at Brett, clearly enjoying himself. In spite of his impatience, Brett was looking impressed. 'You know, I've seen you do that trick a dozen times and it's still worth watching.'

Returning to the basket, his back to Brett, Danny began tearing up one of the cards, chattering as he did so to hold Brett's attention. 'I'll teach it to you sometime. Where exactly are you going in Scotland?'

'The Highlands. It's a bit of a chore but as one day I'll inherit a broken-down old castle, I have to put in an appearance.'

Danny suddenly swung round to face Brett. He had torn the card into the shape of two fangs and they protruded from his upper lip Dracula fashion. With the cape held out like a bat's wings, he advanced on Brett again, his voice sepulchral.

'Castle, eh. Perhaps if they have a nice comfortable graveyard I might make you an offer for it. Move my coffin and Transylvanian soil there and make it my home.'

'Do that,' Brett said as the American swirled his cloak in the best Bela Lugosi fashion. 'I'll be glad to drive a stake through your heart. Now please - put it away.'

Danny took the cape off but resumed his rag picking. Brett checked the contents of his suitcase for the last time and closed the lid.

'You know, you ought to come along, Danny. It would give you a fascinating insight into the life of the aristocracy. The tenants come to pay their respects - there's a fair -country dancing - highland games ... It really is one of the most boring events of the social season.'

Pulling the suitcase from the chaise longue, Brett saw Danny had found a cane and donned an old tail coat. Tilting his top hat, the American did a short Fred Astaire routine. 'Who?' he asked brightly.

'Ginger Rogers,' Brett told him.

Danny grinned. 'Right.'

Brett picked up his suitcase. 'The man of a thousand faces and all of them embarrassingly alike. I'm going.'

Dropping the top hat back into the basket, Danny walked with him to the door. 'Have a good time, pal. See you at the end of the week.'

Brett nodded. 'Don't forget. We have a date to meet Sam Milford.'

Danny made a grimace. 'That I'll remember. You know something - seven years I've been trying to meet him.'

'A lot of other people have been trying longer than that,' Brett told him. 'When you're the richest man in the world, you can be choosey whom you talk to. And they tell me he can't stand impersonators.'

'Funny, funny/ Danny growled.

Brett glanced back at the wicker basket. 'You'll see that gets sent off all right, won't you?' As Danny nodded, Brett steered his suitcase through the

door. 'See you, Danny.'

'See you, pal.' Danny stood a moment in the doorway, then drifted somewhat aimlessly back to the wicker basket. As he dropped a few items back he reacted to something he saw inside. Reaching down he pulled out a shaggy cave-man skin. His respectful murmur echoed round the room as he held it up to the light. 'That guy's family must go further back than I thought!'

On the road below a man was keeping surveillance on Brett's apartment from a telephone kiosk. The man was David Alton and he watched Brett appear on the pavement, sling his suitcase into his Aston Martin, and climb into the driver's seat. He waited until the luxurious car accelerated down the road, then dialled a number. The sound of the passing traffic drowned his voice.

CHAPTER TWO

Sitting relaxed at the wheel, Brett was enjoying his journey. A detour to call on a friend, arranged a couple of weeks earlier, had taken him off the motorway and sunlit fields stretched out on either side of the narrow road. A large wood appeared ahead as he swung round a bend. Half a minute later the sunlight disappeared as the trees thickened around him. As he neared the heart of the wood he saw a car lying right across the road. Believing at first its driver was reversing, he slowed down to allow time for the manoeuvre to be completed. Then, as he drew nearer, he saw the car was stationary.

Wondering if there had been an accident Brett jumped out, only to find the car was empty and apparently undamaged. Seeing no one on the narrow grass verges he gave a shout. 'Hello! Is anybody about?'

The only reply was the faint echo of his shout and the unconcerned singing of the birds. Trying both doors of the car he found them locked. Irritated now, he returned to his car and gave a loud blast on the horn. The sound brought a clatter of wings from a nearby tree as a wood pigeon took fright but there was no human response. Standing back, Brett decided there might just be enough room to clear the roadblock if he mounted the right-hand grass verge. He was just setding in his seat when he heard the faint cry of a woman. 'Help me ... Please help me.'

Jumping from the car Brett pushed his way into the wood. 'Where are you?' he called.

The woman's voice sounded nearer. 'Over here. Please hurry.'

Running through the trees Brett reached a clump of bushes and gave a start. A woman in a trouser suit was lying beneath a tree. She was face downwards and all he could see of her was that she was slimly-built and had long, fair hair.

He knelt beside her with concern. 'Are you hurt?' he asked.

When she shook her head he cradled her into a sitting position. For a

moment, with her head hanging forward, her face was hidden by her long hair. Then, as she brushed it aside and glanced up at him, he saw she was a very beautiful woman. 'What happened?' he asked.

Her eyes moved over his concerned face, then, to his amazement, she let out a hard laugh. As Brett stared at her a man stepped up quietly behind him with a length of sapling in his hand. Brett caught his shadow on the sun-flecked ground and tried to duck away but was too late. The stick caught him brutally on the back of the head and he slumped sideways, then rolled over on his back. As he fought to stay conscious, he saw the man and girl standing over him. Although unknown to him, one was Scott Mas-kell, the other Miss Lindsay. To Brett, fast losing his battle, their figures shortened and lengthened as if they were reflections in a fun-fair mirror. The girl's laugh sounded like some harridan witnessing an execution. As it echoed hollowly in his ears the entire canopy of trees seemed to fall on him and bring Mm oblivion.

The lights above Brett were like moving suns, enormous at one moment and pin-points of light the next. Disconnected visions swam in the great void between them. A car appeared, ludicrously suspended in nothingness. Huge faces, like enormous balloons, floated past him. Two belonged to the couple who had assaulted him in the wood and they eyed him triumphantly. One face he recognized, that of Sam Milford. He struggled to address the tycoon but no words would come and to his despair the strong, smiling face disappeared with the rest into the void. The suns came back, growing larger and hotter until they seemed to envelop him. When they were suddenly extinguished and total darkness came, Brett sank into it with measureless relief.

He awoke to see sunlight streaming through an open window. He tried to move but bis head ached abominably and his body seemed oddly restricted. For a moment he contented himself by moving only his eyes. He saw he was lying in bed in an attractive room which had medical equipment standing round its walls. By his bedside was a large locker with a bowl of flowers on it. More flowers decorated a table beneath the sunlit window. The only door was half-concealed by a hospital screen.

The bright sunlight forced Brett to close his eyes. When he next opened them it was to take stock of himself. He discovered his left arm was lying over the coverlet, bent at right angles, and set in plaster of paris. His throbbing head felt stiff and on examining it with his right hand he found it was heavily bandaged. A wide plaster half-covered his left cheek. His right leg felt immobile and when he reached down he found it also was heavily bandaged.

The effort, making his head throb violently, forced him to lay back. In the silence he noticed for the first time the sounds outside. A tray clattered in the distance, a trolley clanked past the closed door, and scraps of conversation could be heard as footsteps hurried past.

As he lay listening and trying to orient his dazed mind, the door opened and a pretty young nurse entered. Seeing his eyes were open, she gave a bright

smile and approached him. 'Good afternoon, Lord Sinclair. So you're awake at last.'

Brett found his throat was dry and that he had difficulty in speaking. 'Where am I?'

'You're in hospital. But don't talk for a moment. Let me make you more comfortable first.'

Smoothly but efficiently the girl slid the pillows behind Brett's back. 'There,' she said, standing back. 'Now I must tell Dr Fowler that you're awake.'

Brett checked her, his voice hoarse and confused. 'Just a minute. What hospital?'

'The Brantyre General Hospital. You've had a very bad accident. Don't you remember?'

'Accident?' Brett muttered. 'Where? I can't remember an accident.'

The smile the girl gave him was full of professional reassurance. 'You mustn't be in too much of a hurry. It'll all come back to you soon.'

She poured him a drink from a carafe on the locker before leaving the room. Brett winced as he took the glass in his right hand. 'Did a skyscraper fall on me? I've got to know.'

The girl went to the door and turned. 'Dr Fowler will probably tell you all about it. I'll be back in a moment.'

As the door closed Brett took a sip of the drink and then, with some difficulty, set it down on the bedside locker. For the first time he noticed a folded newspaper lying there and drew it towards him. As he was awkwardly trying to unfold it the door opened again and a portly man entered the room, followed by the nurse. He was in his middle fifties, wearing a somewhat old-fashioned tweed suit. His looks and bedside manner were in the best country doctor tradition, guaranteed to make even a dying man feel he had everything to be thankful for. Voice hearty, he crossed the room.

"Lord Sinclair! I'm Dr Fowler. I must say you're a man who enjoys his sleep.' He turned to the smiling girl. 'How long is it, Nurse Crane? Twenty-four hours?'

'A little longer than that, doctor.'

Brett's hand pressed against his forehead. 'To be honest, I'm having some trouble with my memory.'

Fowler shrugged his bulky shoulders. 'It's hardly surprising. You were in a bit of a mess when the police brought you in.'

Brett gave a start. 'The police?'

'Yes. They keep on telephoning and asking when they can speak to you, but don't worry. I'll put them off until you're feeling more chirpy. How *are* you feeling, by the way?'

Brett grimaced. 'Frankly, terrible.'

Fowler gave a hearty chuckle. 'I thought you'd be feeling worse than that. You're in quite a mess, you know.' Reaching out, he pulled back the bedclothes. 'Let's take a look and see how you're getting on.'

'What exactly happened to me?' Brett muttered as the doctor ran his stethoscope over his chest.

'Pulse is good,' Fowler said to the nurse who was taking notes. He turned back to Brett. 'We don't know for sure. You were found at the bottom of a quarry. Arm broken in two places ... A twenty-three stitch gash in your leg ... Multiple bruising and abrasions ... Oh, yes, you were in a right old mess. Breathe in ...'

Brett managed a couple of deep breaths, then gave up the attempt. 'My head's the worst. It's splitting.'

Fowler gave his hearty chuckle. Td forgotten that. You've got a bump on the back of it the size of a duck's egg.'

Brett gave a sudden start. 'I remember something ... There was a girl ... And someone came up behind and hit me.'

‘ What with? Can you remember?'

'I'm not sure. Perhaps with the branch of a tree. I can remember being in a wood.’

'That would make sense,' Fowler told him. 'We found fragments of bark in your hair around the wound.' He glanced at the attentive nurse. 'Get me another phial, will you. Same as the last time. You any idea why you should be attacked,' he asked Brett as the nurse hurried out.

Brett shook his head. 'None at all. Everything's hazy. I don't even remember what I was doing in the wood.'

It's understandable. There's still some concussion. You need a lot more rest but don't worry. You're going to mend very nicely.' Fowler took the fingers of Brett's left hand where they protruded through the plaster cast and squeezed them. Teel that?'

'Yes.'

'Good - good. Yes, you're going to be all right.' Fowler turned to the tray the girl had brought in and began filling a hypodermic needle. Pulling back the pyjama sleeve of Brett's right arm he wiped the skin with surgical fluid and slid home the needle. 'Give it a day or two and your mind will clear. After that it'll just be a matter of waiting for the broken bones to mend.'

Dropping the needle back on the tray he prepared to leave. Confidence gusted around him like the smell of antiseptic. You've nothing to worry about - we'll take care of you. I'll be back to see you again in the morning.'

The effect of the powerful drug was working quickly and already slurring Brett's speech. 'But I'd like to talk to the police. I want to know everything that's happened ...'

Fowler patted Brett's shoulder solicitously. 'So do we all, Lord Sinclair. But your health comes first. Let's wait until tomorrow and see how you're feeling then.'

The man and girl were beginning to distort before Brett's drugged eyes. He struggled to show his urgency but his words came out as little more than a whisper. 'But I want to know today ... I want ...'

The man and girl glanced at one another, then their faces blurred as they withdrew. Left alone, Brett was unable to decide whether he had fallen asleep or was still awake as his hallucinations returned. First Fowler and the nurse seemed to re-enter the room but as they leaned over his bed and laughed exultantly he saw they were the couple who had set the trap for him in the wood. They blurred and vanished and the bright suns came back, massive orbs that hung menacingly over him. As they faded in turn he heard voices repeating words he could not catch, and then the face of Sam Milford appeared. As he tried to appeal to it for help, it swung away, to be followed in turn by the faces of Miss Lkidsay, Scott Maskell, Dr Fowler and Nurse Crane. All five heads seemed to swing to and fro as if joined at the end of a pendulum. A ticking sound, synchronized with the swing, grew louder and louder, a beat that was hypnotic in its insistence and seemed to continue into eternity.

There was a faint ticking in the room that same night when the door quietly opened. The sound came from the small travelling clock on the bedside locker whose hands showed the time to be 3 am. The white-jacketed figure of a male nurse was silhouetted for a second in the doorway before he crossed the floor to Brett's bedside. As the man leaned over him, Brett stirred and then settled back into fitful sleep. Satisfied, the man picked up a tray of glasses that had been left on the locker, carried it from the room, and closed the door.

He walked down the corridor outside towards a flight of stone stairs. The corridor was dimly-lit and the man failed to notice the lace of one of his shoes had become untied. As he reached the top of the steps he trod on the lace.

The tray and glasses fell with a crash. The man tried to break his fall with his hands but his forehead struck the corner of a step with sickening force. Instantly his limbs went limp and he tumbled the rest of the way like a lifeless doll, to lay motionless on the landing below.

CHAPTER THREE

It was five-fifteen when Brett awoke. Through the window curtains he could see the brightness of a summer morning. Although it took him a few seconds to remember his surroundings, there was an alertness in his movements that had not been present the previous day as he reached out and pressed the bedside buzzer.

Two minutes passed and no one entered the room. Listening, Brett realized the hospital sounds were no longer in evidence: the building sounded as quiet as if it were empty. Puzzled, he rang the buzzer again. When there was still no response he pulled himself upright in bed. 'Nurse,' he called. A moment later, louder. 'Nurse!'

He began to show irritation when the corridor outside remained silent. Reaching out, he picked up a small metal dish from the bedside locker, spilled

the fruit from it, and banged it against the side of his bed. He accompanied its loud clatter with more shouts. 'Nurse! Doctor I Somebody!'

Frustration was added to his impatience when there was still no response. Throwing back the bedclothes, he painfully swung his legs to the ground. The effort told on him immediately and he had a spell of dizziness. When it cleared he made a great effort and pushed himself to his feet. Almost to his surprise his legs held and he started towards the door. Halfway there he lost balance and stumbled against the screen which fell with a loud clatter. Expecting the din must bring somebody, he supported himself against the door for a few seconds. When the building remained silent he pulled the door open, at the same time shouting at the top of his voice. 'Nurse 1'

The shout died away in his throat. Instead of standing in the expected hospital corridor, he found the passage before him a scene of almost total decay. Where damaged plaster did not reveal naked laths, damp paper sagged in strips from the walls. The floorboards were bare and covered with litter. A naked light bulb dangled on a flex from the skeleton ceiling. A built-in cupboard door hung drunkenly from one hinge.

His face a study of bewilderment Brett took a few steps towards the flight of stone steps. Halfway there he paused with a cry of revulsion. A large rat was chewing at a splintered floorboard. Seeing him it scuttled away and vanished beneath the decayed wainscoting.

Brett moved on to the built-in cupboard. A metal object inside it caught his eye. A shining new tape recorder was standing on one of the shelves. Reaching inside Brett pushed the start button. The sounds that issued from the loudspeaker were those of a busy, well-staffed hospital. Face very thoughtful now, Brett stopped the recorder and limped on.

At the top of the stairs he gave a start at the sight of the body lying on the landing below. Limping downwards with considerable difficulty he reached the man and turned him over. Although Brett did not know him, the face that stared up at him sightlessly was David Alton.

Grimacing his disbelief, Brett continued down a second flight of stairs. It brought him into another corridor that led into the rear hall of what had once been an attractive country house. Years of neglect, aided by vandals, had made it an almost total ruin. Nearly every window was broken. The balustrade of the curved staircase to the rooms above was broken and hanging loose. Some of the floorboards had been torn up, exposing the joists below. Cobwebs were everywhere and dust and rubbish blackened the floor and the walls.

It was the group of incongruous objects in the centre of the hall that drew Brett's eye. Four tea chests were drawn together to form a makeshift table. A butane gas stove, a tea pot and cups stood on them. Drawn up to the table were a couple of new-looking folding chairs.

Satisfied the hall was empty Brett entered it cautiously and approached the makeshift table. A number of magazines and newspapers were scattered over it. Among them was a large envelope. Brett reached out for it with his good

arm and with some difficulty pulled out its contents.

To his surprise they consisted of a number of large photographs of himself. Each portrayed his face at a different angle and were criss-crossed by lines of measurement. Brett studied them for a moment, then returned them to the envelope. Limping across the hall he reached the large double front doors. One door, with cobwebs linking it to the floor, had clearly not been opened for a long time. The other showed signs of recent use and Brett opened it and peered out.

Steps, overgrown by weeds, led down to an untended drive and grounds. Brett stepped cautiously outside. There was no sound except for the singing of birds. A house agent's sign, faded by sun and rain, was attached to the closed front door. It read: FOR SALE. LYNSTED HOUSE. APPLY PHILLIPSON, SUMRIE AND HIRST. ALWOODY ROAD.

Lowering himself down the steps, Brett prepared to make his getaway. Halfway down he heard the sound of an approaching car. As the engine note changed he realized the driver was preparing to turn into the drive. With no cover within reach, Brett had no choice but to hurry back and take cover inside the hall. Leaving the door an inch ajar, he peered out.

A black Ford appeared round the overgrown bushes of the drive and drew up at the bottom of the steps. As its front doors opened Brett caught a glimpse of Dr Fowler and Nurse Crane. A few seconds later its rear doors opened, but Brett, drawing back on seeing Fowler and the girl, was too concerned to find a hiding place to realize the car contained other passengers. Closing the door quietly, he gazed with urgency around the hall. All the doors surrounding it were closed and if he made for one, only to discover it was locked, he would be caught. For a moment he considered the main staircase, but apart from looking unsafe it was in a direct line with the front door. His only alternative seemed a retreat up the stone steps with the intention of slipping back when the others were well into the house.

His withdrawal into the passage was not a moment too soon. As he painfully climbed the first flight of steps he heard footsteps crossing the hall and Dr Fowler's fruity voice.

'Alton! We're here. Alton 1'

Brett guessed the man he was calling was the man lying dead at his feet. Fowler's voice came again, grumbling at the nurse. 'Where the devil's Alton got to? Never mind. Let's go and take a look at Sinclair.'

Hearing their approaching footsteps Brett realized they too had chosen to take the rear corridor instead of the unsound staircase. Hurrying up the second flight he gazed urgently around for a place to hide. With his limited mobility the cupboard with the broken dcor seemed his only refuge and he did his best to take cover inside it.

He heard Fowler talking to the girl as the couple mounted the stairs. A moment later the doctor cursed as they stumbled over Alton's dead body. The girl's voice sounded brittle with alarm. 'Could Sinclair have done this?'

The short silence before Fowler answered told Brett the doctor was examining the dead man. No; it's unlikely in his present state. It looks as if Alton slipped and fell. But we'd better get to Sinclair quickly in case he's woken up.'

Brett pressed back behind the broken door as Fowler and the girl hurried past and entered his room. Sounds of alarm followed immediately and the couple ran out into the corridor. 'I'll check this floor,' Fowler panted. 'You take a look upstairs.'

To Brett's relief both of them ran to the opposite end of the corridor. Waiting until they disappeared, he slipped from the cupboard and descended the stone steps again. As he reached the door that led into the hall he could hear the echo of footsteps upstairs as the frantic search went on. Across the hall he could see the front door was ajar, with sunlight streaming through it. Taking a deep breath he stepped out and made for it as fast as his bandaged leg would allow.

He had not taken three paces before a hand grabbed his shoulder and swung him round. Unprepared and unable to defend himself, he had only a split-second glimpse of his impeccably-dressed assailant before a fist crashed into his jaw and knocked him unconscious. Scott Maskell, rubbing bis fist, looked both angry and pleased with himself as he stared down at the motionless Brett. His shout echoed around the empty house.

"You can stop looking! He's down here.'

Fowler came running down into the hall. The nurse followed him a few seconds later. As the doctor, his relieved face beaded with sweat, knelt down and gave Brett a quick examination, Maskell stared at him accusingly. 'You couldn't have given him a large enough dose!'

'I've given him all I dared,' Fowler told him. 'In fact he's been right up to the limit.'

'He'll survive. Give him another shot now.'

'No. It's too risky.'

Maskell's face tightened. 'I said give him another.'

Fowler hesitated, then shrugged and glanced at the nurse. She went to the makeshift table and fetched his medical bag. As Fowler filled a hypodermic needle and sank it into Brett's arm, Miss Lindsay entered the hall. Her expression and voice lacked their usual composure as she approached Maskell.

'Do you know Alton's dead?'

Maskell gave a violent start. 'What?' As his eyes moved to the unconscious Brett, Fowler straightened and shook his head. 'No. We saw Alton on our way upstairs and it was almost certainly an accident. I estimate he's been dead at least three hours. If Sinclair had done it he'd be miles away by this time.'

Miss Lindsay was watching Maskell. 'It makes things very awkward, doesn't it?'

Maskell stood deep in thought for a moment, then made his decision. 'I

want to bring everything forward twenty-four hours!'

The eyes of both girls turned on Fowler who shrugged his heavy shoulders. 'I can't see any reason why we shouldn't.'

Maskell jabbed a highly-polished shoe at the unconscious Brett. 'What about him? You don't need him any longer, do you?'

'Not really,' Fowler conceded.

'Then we'll go ahead as planned. Get to work on him!'

As the slower-moving doctor did not respond, Maskell motioned the nurse to bring the medical bag to him. Selecting from it a vicious-looking instrument resembling a saw, he thrust it at Fowler, his voice impatient. 'Get on with it, for God's sake. The sooner we finish and get out of here the better.'

The street outside Brett's apartment was quiet in the early morning sunlight. Parked cars lined the pavements but at that time of day only once, a bronze Aston Martin, had an occupant. He, slumped forward in the driver's seat, appeared either asleep, drunk, or dead.

The silence was broken by a milkman walking from the apartment block and swinging a crate of empties on to his float. The crash woke Brett, the Aston Martin's occupant, and as the float hummed away down the road he pushed open the door and staggered out onto the pavement.

With the sunlight hurting his eyes, he gazed around him. As he recognized his familiar surroundings his eyes moved downward, to fill with bewilderment on seeing he was fully dressed and showed no sign of hospital attention or injury.

An early morning workman, whistling along the pavement, noticed the immaculately-dressed man stagger and lean against the Aston Martin for support. He hurried forward with some concern. 'Anything wrong, mate?'

Brett, totally lost and confused, turned to him. I'd a broken arm yesterday,' he muttered. 'And, among other things, multiple bruises and cuts. How can I be standing here like this today?'

The workman's expression changed from concern to amusement. 'It must have been some party, mate! If I were you I'd jump back into your car and sleep it off. Only get into the back seat or a copper might put a breathalyser on you.'

Grinning, he walked on. Brett pushed himself away from the car and stared down again at his immaculate appearance. As if to hold on to his sanity he lifted his hands and pressed them tightly to his temples.

CHAPTER FOUR

The volume of the whisky Brett was pouring himself made Danny eye him with concern. 'Do you know that's the second blockbuster in five minutes?'

Although pale beneath his tan Brett managed a smile. 'Actually it's the

third!'

The two men were in Brett's apartment. Danny began to make a comment, then changed his mind. Grimacing wryly to hide his forebodings Brett picked up his glass. 'I wouldn't blame you for one moment if you think I'm going out of my mind. But everything happened just as I told you.'

Danny frowned and moved restlessly round the room. Unusually subdued, he was obviously taking Brett's story seriously. Reaching the window he turned.

'I believe you. I believe you because I don't think you could make up a story as wild as that.'

Brett took a swig of the whisky. 'I've been over it step by step in my mind a dozen times. And...'

'Go over it again step by step,' Danny urged. 'But this time do it aloud.'

Brett sank into an armchair. After concentrating a moment he glanced ruefully up at the American. 'There are an awful lot of blank spaces!'

Danny shrugged. 'Don't rush it. Just take it from the top.'

'AH right. It started here. I said goodbye to you and took my bag down to my car. That was around mid-day yesterday ...'

The American broke in sharply. 'What was that?'

'I said I took my bag down to my car and... '

'No, no, no. You said the time!'

Brett stared at him. 'Around mid-day yesterday.'

'Uh-uh. Wrong.'

'But you were here,' Brett said defensively. Tou saw me leave.'

'I saw you leave all right, pal. But that was seven days ago.'

'Seven days!' Brett looked as if a bombshell had burst in the apartment. 'But that's impossible.'

'Impossible or not, it's true, pal. I've had three different dates since I last saw you.'

Brett had grown even paler as he sat digesting the news. He took another swig of whisky and then, with an exclamation, jumped to his feet.

'This is all getting a bit too much to take. Let's go on with it later. I have to get changed. I've made an appointment with my doctor for later in the morning - perhaps he can offer some suggestions.'

The Englishman's uncharacteristic refusal to face up to his problem was not lost on the uneasy Danny. At the same time the American was relieved that he intended taking medical advice.

'It's a good idea to have him check you over. Anything I can do in the meanwhile?'

Brett shook his head as he walked towards his bedroom door. Then he halted and turned. 'Yes; there isl You remember the house I told you about - the one with the hospital room?' As Danny nodded, Brett went on: 'I'm sure I didn't imagine that. There was an estate agent's board on the door. The name was PHILLIPSON, SUMREE & HIRST. The place was up for sale and was

called Lynsted House. Think you can find it for me?'

Danny nodded eagerly. That shouldn't be too tough. There must be some kind of association of house agents.' He moved towards the door. T.eave it to me, pal.'

There's a hospital room upstairs,' Brett reminded him.

'Right. Lynsted House.' Opening the door, Danny turned back with a reassuring grin. You know - I've always figured I'd make a good private eye. Leave it to me and your house is as good as found.'

Brett checked him ruefully as he was about to leave. Thanks, but there's just one thing. If it turns out the house doesn't exist, don't tell me. At the moment it's the only reality I've got.'

Danny gave him a sympathetic nod and vanished. For almost a minute Brett stood lost in thought. Then, hauling himself out of his mood, he turned towards the bedroom to change. As he reached the door the telephone began to ring. He paused a moment as if reluctant to make contact with the outside world again, then moved towards it.

The surgery was not large but its decor reflected in full measure the high fees paid by the patients examined there. The man at the desk equally lived up to the public image of Harley Street consultants. With dark hair silvered at the temples and wearing an elegant grey suit, he was urbanity from his manicured hands to his fashionable, handmade shoes. At the moment he was answering the desk telephone. He jotted down a note and tut-tutted his amusement as he replaced the receiver and leaned back in his chair. His glance was directed at Brett who was busy putting on his shirt at the far side of the room.

You know, I've probably more hypochondriacs on my case books than any other man in Harley Street. There was a lady who believed she was the victim of a human form of foot and mouth disease ...'

'Is that your subtle way of telling me you think I'm imagining things?' Brett interrupted.

The consultant smiled. 'If it was, it wasn't very subtle, was it? No, Brett, I don't say you're a hypochondriac. But the X-rays show no traces of a break in your arm, and you certainly don't have any stitches in your leg.'

"What about the back of my head?' Brett demanded.

There is a trace of an abrasion there, but it has almost healed. From the look of it I'd say it had been healing for a week or more.'

'What about the punctures in my arm?'

The consultant nodded. 'Yes, you've had some injections. But even with blood tests I doubt if I could identify what was given you. What have you been up to, Brett?'

Brett straightened his tie and drew on his jacket Tou wouldn't believe it even if I could tell you. What's your diagnosis?'

'Physically, as always, you're in first class shape.'

'And mentally?'

The consultant's hesitation was almost imperceptible as he shrugged. 'These days we all live under considerable stress and sometimes it gets on top of the best of us. A couple of weeks' holiday wouldn't do you any harm.'

'So you think I might be a stress victim?'

'Victim is too strong a word. I simply recommend a holiday.'

Brett hid his disappointment well as he shook the consultant's hand. Thanks anyway, Phillip. At least I know I'm not falling to pieces.' He gave a start as he noticed a set of photographs on the doctor's desk. Showing an attractive woman's face, they were scored by measurement lines both laterally and longitudinally. Brett looked both curious and excited as he glanced up at the consultant. 'What are these?'

'Surgeon's references. The lady is going to have a new nose. Her third in two years.'

'Do they always work from this kind of thing?'

"Usually. Plastic surgery is an art form, you know. Sculpting in living tissue.'

Brett leaned forward. 'If someone wanted to create a double, an exact likeness of me, would they work from photographs or the real thing?'

He received a puzzled smile. 'That's a fanciful idea, isn't it? What makes you ask?'

Never mind. Just tell me how they would do it.'

'I imagine they'd use both. When a painter does a portrait, he makes reference sketches. But he usually has the subject sit for him as well.'

Brett let out his breath as if a great load had fallen from him. 'Phillip, you're quite a doctor. After only twenty minutes with you I feel one hundred per cent better.'

' You do? I can't think why.'

Brett was already at the door. Til tell you why one day. Thanks again, Phillip. Bye.'

As the door closed the puzzled consultant picked up the photographs. 'Heaven forbid there should ever be two like him,' he muttered ruefully.

The Aston Martin, weaving skilfully through the busy London traffic, swung down a side street and drew into the forecourt of a sports car specialist garage. A man in overalls, sitting in the cash kiosk talking to a pump attendant, recognized the car and rose from his seat. CUmbing from the car Brett stood waiting for him. His manner as he greeted the young man suggested he was fully restored to his old self.

'Hello, Charlie. It's good to see you. How's business?'

His heartiness and general behaviour were clearly puzzling the young manager. 'Fine, sir. Business is fine.'

'Good. Glad to hear it. Look, Charlie, I've just noticed I'm well over my service mileage. Can you take her in this week?'

The manager gave Brett an uneasy grin. 'What's the gag, sir?'

'Gag? What do you mean?'

Charlie indicated the Aston Martin. 'Well, it's all arranged, isn't it? She's coming in on Monday.'

Brett's new assurance evaporated. 'She is? Not that I know of.'

Charlie fished into his overall pocket and pulled out a. wad of service sheets. Thumbing through them, he pulled one out and read aloud: 'Lord Sinclair ... Aston Martin ... full service. Collect at 8.00 on Monday.'

The astonished Brett took the oil-stained service sheet from him. 'Who arranged this?'

The young manager's surprise grew. 'You did.' He indicated the service sheet. 'That's your signature, isn't it?'

Brett examined the sheet more closely. 'Yes.' He glanced up. 'When was this made out?'

Charlie looked uncertain whether to play along or call a doctor. 'You should know. You were here less than two hours ago!' At Brett's expression he showed concern. 'Are you feeling all right, sir?'

With an effort Brett pulled himself together. Tfes, of course.' He paused to steady his voice, then went on: 'Charlie - under the circumstances it's going to sound strange but bear with me. Are you absolutely certain it was me you saw?'

He received an emphatic nod. 'I am unless you've got an identical twin brother. And if you have, he's got an identical car with the same registration number.'

Brett looked again as if he were living a bad dream. 'You saw all this yourself?'

Tfes, sir. I attended to you personally. I always do.'

Somewhat unsteadily Brett moved back to his car. 'All right. Thanks, Charlie.'

The manager followed him solicitously. "You're sure you wouldn't like me to call a doctor, sir?'

Brett gave him a glance, then started the engine and shot away. The manager stood scratching his head as he watched the Aston Martin vanish into the passing traffic.

CHAPTER FIVE

The hum of the air conditioner in the sumptuous penthouse was low and discreet. The huge portrait of Sam Milford gazed benevolently from the wall. Scott Maskell, standing beneath it, was looking very- pleased with life as he lowered his eyes from the portrait to the two people alongside him. One was Fowler, still dressed in his somewhat old-fashioned tweed suit. The other was the blonde Miss Lindsay. Ele-gandy groomed and wearing an exclusive model dress, she also gave the appearance of finding life to her satisfaction.

Maskell indicated the cabinet of bottles across the suite. 'I don't think it's too early to have a celebratory drink, do you?'

There was no deference in the smile the girl gave him. The tone of her reply, with its hint of caution, suggested she felt very much the equal of her companions. 'I agree -it's going exacdy as we hoped, although there's still a long way to go yet. So let's drink to the next stage.'

Fowler, whose somewhat bucolic eyes had been on the bottles for some time, gave an impatient grunt. ‘ Why do you two always need an excuse to drink? Just fill the glasses and get on with it.'

Maskell gave him a look of censure before walking over to the cabinet. 'Your affection for grape and grain will be your downfall one day. But then I suppose a doctor who's barred from practice doesn't have much further to fall.’

Fowler gave him an aggressive stare. 'Exactly. So skip the temperence lecture and pour.'

The girl addressed Maskell as he began setting out glasses on the top of the cabinet. 'By the way, I did tell you I'd received a cable, didn't I? The arrangements have been confirmed for Wednesday.'

Maskell nodded as he reached for a bottle. ‘ He cabled me too. The timing couldn't be better.' He glanced round at Fowler. Tour patient will be fully primed by then, I hope.'

"He's ready now,' Fowler told him.

Maskell brought the drinks over on a tray. Fowler took his glass and drained it in one swallow. Maskell eyed him with some contempt. 'Why don't you stand next to the bottle, old boy? It'll save me walking backwards and forwards.'

Shrugging, Fowler crossed over to the cabinet. The girl's eyes followed him. 'Have you started the tests yet?'

Fowler answered without glancing back. 'Of course. He went to the garage this morning as planned. There wasn't a hitch.'

•Excellent,' Maskell said.

What else have you got lined up for him?' the girl asked.

Bottle in hand, the doctor turned towards them. 'The big one comes tonight. If he passes that, we're home and dry.'

TTou mean with Danny Wilde?'

•Right. The acid test. Total confrontation.'

The girl's face betrayed her fascination. 'How will he react?'

'Exactly the way I tell him. Naturally I'm going to be there. But I'm quite certain he'll fool Wilde.'

'And you know where Wilde is going?'

Maskell's cultured voice sounded amused. 'Of course. Our wire tap has been very informative.'

The girl gave a contented sigh. 'So until that's over there's nothing more we can do?’

There was a chuckle from the drinks cabinet. 'Wrong! We can have another whisky!'

The black Ford was strategically parked between two street lamps on the opposite side of the road to Brett's apartment. Other cars parked in front and behind it made it almost totally inconspicuous. The headlights of an approaching car showed two figures were occupying the front seats. Sally Crane, no longer wearing hospital uniform, was behind the wheel and Fowler, a hip flask in his hand, sat alongside her. Both turned as the car, a low-slung Ferrari, passed them and drew into the pavement outside Brett's apartment.

A moment later Danny Wilde jumped out of the Ferrari. His clothes, in high fashion, suggested he had a date that evening. He reached back into the car for some papers, then ran up the apartment steps. The girl turned to Fowler as the American disappeared.

1 wonder how he'll take the news?'

Fowler unscrewed the top from the flask. 'It'll confuse him.' He offered the flask to the girl who shook her head.

What happens now?' she asked.

Fowler settled comfortably back in his seat and took a swig from the flask. 'We relax and wait.'

Up in the apartment Brett was gazing excitedly at an estate agent's brochure Danny had handed him. Affixed to it was a photograph of Lynsted House. Enthusiastic as he was, Brett did not notice Danny's sober expression.

That's it! That's the house! Did you get inside and see the hospital room?'

Danny, clearly hating his task, tried to calm the delighted Brett. "Now just a minute. Take it easy, pal, because you're not going to like this ...'

'Did you find the room?' Brett insisted.

'No,' Danny told him bluntly.

‘ But it was there. I *swear* it was.'

Danny lost his patience. "Will you listen? Lynsted House was burned to the ground this morning.'

Brett stared at him as if stunned. Danny nodded sympathetically. 'I went out there to take a look. It must have gone up like a petrol bomb. There's hardly a thing left standing.'

Brett stared at the photograph again, then, with an air of despair, tossed it aside. 'Bang goes the only clue I could remember.'

There was a short silence, then Danny glanced up. 'Did you get anywhere today?'

There was a hint of defiance in Brett's expression. 'I'm still physically fit, if that's what you mean.'

Danny frowned and made a deprecatory gesture. 'Who thought anything else?'

Another awkward silence fell. It was broken by Brett's voice, pitched low as

if he were talking to himself. 'I don't know how or why. But I believe they've created a double of me - a total mirror image. Someone who not only looks like me but talks like me, dresses like me, even drives the same car.'

Danny's eyes were on his face. Under his scrutiny Brett turned defiant again. 'You don't believe me, do you?'

‘ Why wouldn't I?' Danny protested. 'If you say so, then it's true. But there's one thing I've got to ask. Why?'

As Brett shook his head dejectedly, Danny jumped to his feet. 'Listen, you can't go on like this. Join my date. Call a girl and we'll make it a foursome.'

Brett turned away. 'Thanks, but not tonight.'

Tal, a little action will do you good. OK, so some crazy things have happened to you. At least forget about them tonight.'

'That's exactly what I'm going to do,' Brett told him, indicating a whisky bottle standing on a nearby table. 'I'm having a night by the fireside with an old Scottish friend.' Danny tried again and then, seeing argument was useless, moved reluctantly towards the door. 'I'll drop in again tomorrow.' Brett managed a smile. 'All right. Enjoy yourself.' With a last worried glance back Danny went out. Selecting a magazine and pouring himself a drink Brett settled in a deep armchair beside the telephone.

In the street outside Fowler lowered his hip flask and nudged the girl. Danny was crossing the pavement towards his car. The girl started the engine and a moment later followed the Ferrari down the street.

With the evening traffic dense she was forced to keep in close attendance to avoid losing contact. Danny, an observant driver, noticed the Ford's sidelights in his mirror, but with his mind on Brett paid little attention to them. But when after half a dozen street turnings they were still behind him he decided a check could do no harm. Suddenly revving his engine he shot past a couple of cars and turned sharply into a side street. The girl responded, only to find the Ferrari stationary beneath a street lamp a hundred yards down the road. Fowler took in the situation at a glance. 'Drive right past,' he told the girl. 'And don't hurry it.'

Danny, turned in his seat, watched the Ford approaching. The street lamp momentarily illuminated the man and girl as the car went past but their faces meant nothing to him. When they paid him no attention and the Ford, driven without haste, disappeared down the street, Danny decided he had been unduly suspicious. Switching on bis engine he drove on to bis date.

The decor of Danny's rendezvous, one of London's newest - 'in' places, was 19th century. Small intimate booths, with plush seats and heavy drapes to ensure privacy, lined one wall. The bar opposite was ornate with brass and copper fittings and the huge mirrors so loved by Victorians. Chandeliers hung from the ceilings and theatre posters of a century ago hung in frames on the walls. In spite of its old world appearance, the plush fittings and the softly-

treading waiters gave warning the place was both select and expensive.

Fowler and the nurse were sitting in one of the booths with drinks on the table before them. Ostensibly in conversation, they were watching the nattily-dressed Danny chatting up a stunningly beautiful girl at the bar. With a couple of drinks already inside him and another at his elbow, Danny was in top gear as he gesticulated enthusiastically at the girl.

'No; it was on television. I tell you I saw it but couldn't believe it. It's got to be one of the greatest miracles of nature. You don't believe me ...?' He turned to the barman, appropriately adorned with mutton-chop whiskers and a Kitchener-type moustache. 'Albert, do you have an egg I could borrow? Just a regular old chicken egg.'

Albert produced an egg from beneath the counter and presented it to the American. Danny took it happily. 'Thanks, Albert. That's service.' Holding the egg between thumb and forefinger he turned to the girl while the barman, fascinated now, leaned closer.

'Now look at that,' Danny said. 'Fragile - delicate - one little tap and splat ... Right? So would you believe that in fact it's one of the strongest structures in the entire universe? You wouldn't? All right; I'll prove it.' His hand closed around the egg. 'The secret is to apply constant, even pressure. It doesn't matter how hard I press - I can't break it. Now watch ...'

With some ceremony Danny set his elbow on the bar and lifted his closed fist. Although the girl was having difficulty in hiding her indifference, the barman moved closer, his eyes glued on Danny's fist as it tightened. The American grinned confidentially. 'See. As hard as you like. The strongest thing in the universe ...'

There was a sudden crack and squelch. Yolk squeezed through Danny's fingers and glooped down on to the counter. The girl tried unsuccessfully to suppress her giggles. Unlocking his fingers Danny stared comically at the barman. You gave me the wrong egg I'

The barman sympathetically handed over a napkin. Danny dried his hand, sighed, then offered his arm to the girl. 'Shall we eat? Perhaps a nice large omelet...'

As they moved towards a booth, Sally Crane gave a hard laugh. 'A comedian!'

Fowler's grin was short-lived. 'Don't let that side of him fool you. I'm told others have and they've regretted it.'

The girl threw a glance at the entrance. "What time did you tell *him* to be here when you phoned?'

'Nine-thirty.'

The girl glanced down at her watch. 'And you're quite confident it's going to work out?'

Fowler sank down his drink and waved a waiter towards his booth. 'I'm certain. So relax.'

The hand of the ornate clock above the bar was pointing to the half-hour

exacdy when Fowler leaned across the table and nudged the girl's arm. Turning, she saw Brett Sinclair approaching the bar. There was nothing of the moody air he had shown earlier in the evening; although slightly subdued he appeared totally relaxed. With no more than a cursory glance around the room, he gave the barman a friendly smile. 'A Scotch, please. A large one.'

Half-hidden in the alcove, Sally Crane watched in fascination as Brett climbed on a plush stool and began sipping his drink. 'He looks perfect,' she murmured.

At his table, which was nearly opposite Brett, Danny was chatting happily to his girl as he sipped an after-dinner brandy. 'So I told her I was under age and I couldn't ...' Catching sight of Brett at that moment, his words broke off in mid-sentence.

'Well, what d' you know ...'

The girl glanced round, 'What's the matter?'

Delight at his friend's appearance was obvious in Danny's every gesture as he jumped to his feet. 'There's someone just come in I want you to meet, honey. I'll be right back.'

Unaware he was being watched eagerly by both Fowler and Sally Crane, Danny closed in on Brett at the bar. 'Quiet night by the fire, eh?' he grinned, running an approving eye over Brett's clothes. Although different from the Englishman's attire earlier in the evening, in cut and style they were typically Brett Sinclair. 'Who're you meeting?'

Brett showed mild pleasure at seeing Danny but no surprise. ‘ No one in particular.'

'Don't give me that, pal. What happened to that old Scottish friend? Did he run out on you?'

Brett looked puzzled. 'Scottish friend?'

'Your bottle of whisky. Remember?'

The Englishman's face cleared. 'Oh, yes. I just felt like getting out for a while, that's all.'

'And you've no date?'

When Brett shook his head Danny's enthusiasm grew. 'Great. So let's do something. Come over and meet Anna-belle. I'll get her to call her mother up or someone else of your generation and we'll make it a foursome.'

Brett shifted restlessly. 'Another time, Danny. To tell the truth, I don't think I'd be very good company tonight. You go ahead and enjoy yourself.'

Danny began to show concern again. 'Hey, come on. That's not like you. You're the guy who won't go to bed when there's a light burning anywhere in the world.'

Brett shrugged. 'Let's just say I'm having an off night.'

'OK. We all have 'em, so this is what we'll do. You sit tight, I'll bring AnnabeUe over, and we'll all be depressed together. How's that strike you?'

Brett sighed. 'You just won't give up, will you?'

Tfou noticed?' Danny grinned. 'Now stay right here.'

He hurried back to AnnabeUe. Left alone, Brett stared disinterestedly around the room, only for his eyes to fall on Fowler who had moved to the entrance of his booth to make his presence seen. As Brett stared at him, Fowler jerked his head at the street door.

Back in his alcove Danny was lifting AnnabeUe from her seat. 'I feel it a sort of sacred duty to help this buddy of mine. You know how these lords are - their breeding makes 'em temperamental sometimes. We'U have a couple of drinks with him and then maybe go back to his flat...'

The girl, pouting at first, was suddenly aU eagerness. 'Is he a real lord?'

Danny led her forward. 'Come and find out. Of course, he's not wearing his coronet tonight but ...' His chatter broke off as he reached the bar and discovered Brett's stool was empty.

The girl showed disappointment now. Where's he gone?'

Brett's behaviour, so untypical of the friend Danny knew, brought back to the American Brett's earUer talk of a double. Lifting the girl on to a stool, he ordered her a couple of martinis. 'It could be he wasn't the guy I thought. I'm going to find out. You stay here.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' the girl complained. 'How long are you going to be?'

Danny pressed her hand reassuringly and slid the two martinis in front of her. ‘ Be a good girl, honey. I'll be back before you're drunk.'

Before the indignant girl could protest further he hurried towards the exit. On his way he caught a glimpse of Fowler and recognized him. But the glimpse was fleeting and with Brett on his mind it did no more than check the American's stride. Hurrying on he pushed his way outside.

Being an 'in' place, the Victorian bar had a discreet entrance and the Chelsea street in which it stood was dimly-lit. Nevertheless Danny managed to catch sight of Brett's tall figure a moment before he vanished round an intersection. Breaking into a run, the American went after him.

Rounding the corner he found himself in a long and narrow street. It appeared deserted and yet its length precluded any chance that Brett could have escaped down it. Puzzled, Danny dropped into a walk. A building was under construction alongside him and its scaffolding was protected by a crude fence of planks and corrugated iron sheets that flanked the pavement. Certain Brett was close by, Danny paused by one of the dark openings that interspaced the makeshift fence. His call echoed across the narrow street.

‘ Brett 1 Brett, pal, where are you?'

The only answer was the hum of distant traffic. Danny moved on a few more yards and paused beneath a street lamp. It threw a shadow across his puzzled face.

'Brett! What's going on?'

He moved on again when the street remained silent. Without knowing why, he could now feel the pounding of his heart. Another dark opening yawned in the fence ahead. As he neared it he thought he heard a movement inside the

building site. Pausing by the opening he peered into the shadows. In spite of himself, his voice sounded tight and hoarse.

'Brett. Are you in there?'

For an answer an arm shot out and curled viciously round his throat. Caught by surprise he was dragged through the opening and into a clutter of concrete blocks, oil drums, and metal pipes that lay around the base of the scaffolding. Choking with the savage pressure he could not see his assailant but desperation brought its own reaction. Driving his elbow back he heard a gasp, and as the pressure eased he was able to squirm round.

He let out a cry of astonishment.

'Brett. Have you gone crazy?'

In the half-light provided by the street lamps outside, the Englishman's expression was murderous. Hurling Danny away so that he fell awkwardly over a slab of concrete, Brett stared around for a weapon. Seeing a shovel he snatched it up and advanced on the half-stunned American. His voice was like the snarl of an animal. 'I told you to stay away from me. Now I'll make you.'

CHAPTER SIX

Danny rose unsteadily to his knees. What's the matter with you?' he muttered. 'What are you trying to do?'

Almost in disbelief he saw Brett swing back the shovel. He rolled aside just in time: the shovel struck a vertical scaffold pole with an impact that cracked the wooden handle. Very sober now but still unable to fight back, Danny jumped to his feet and backed away. 'I don't know what's got into you but that's enough. Let's go back to your flat and...'

Before he could finish Brett came at him with a rush. Oil drums clattered as the two men rolled over and over. As Brett pulled away and drew back his foot, the American's dazed mind cleared and he realized the fight was a life and death affair. Hooking a foot behind Brett's leg he struck out with the other, hurling the Englishman heavily backwards against a pile of concrete blocks. Not wishing to take advantage of his half-stunned condition, Danny stood over him and tried to lift him to his feet.

T.et's go now,' he panted. 'You need medical attention or something.'

In the half-light Brett's face was a mask of hate. Without warning he snatched up a brick and hurled it at Danny's face. The American ducked but the brick caught him a glancing blow on the shoulder. A second later Brett threw himself forward again.

With the two men evenly matched, the fight that followed was hard and brutal. After exchanging punches for a minute or more Brett picked up a scaffolding pole and swung it viciously. Leaping aside, Danny managed to grab hold of it as Brett tried a second scything blow. Staggering, gasping for breath, the two men reeled and stumbled over the piles of building materials.

Danny had to keep leaping back as Brett's feet lashed out at him. Yanking desperately on the pole, he managed to draw the Englishman off balance. Risking everything, he released the pole, jumped in, and unleashed a punch that travelled no more than eight inches. It caught Brett too high on the jaw for a knockout but sent him crashing heavily among a pile of broken bricks. As he struck them Danny heard a groan of pain and saw Brett's left forearm, from which the sleeve had been torn, was severely abrased by a fractured brick. Feeling deathly sick, the American supported himself by the scaffolding. 'All right,' he gasped. That's enough or we're going to kill one another. Let's go somewhere and sort this out.'

Brett's eyes had closed and he was lying motionless. Suddenly concerned, Danny bent over him. 'What happened, pal? Did you catch your head?'

When Brett did not answer Danny threw a desperate glance for help round the shadowy site. It was a near fatal mistake. A hand grabbed his shoulder, swung him round and the glow of the London sky seemed to explode as a fist crashed brutally on his jaw. A moment later he found himself lying on his back with Brett straddling his chest. A half-brick in the Englishman's hand betrayed his murderous intention.

The desperate American tried to roll away but the blow had drained his strength and he was at Brett's mercy. As the Englishman straightened and raised his arm, a ray from a street lamp caught his face. It appeared suddenly confused, as if an unwelcome memory was in sudden conflict with the violence of his intent. As the brick poised over the helpless Danny's head, it was clearly touch and go which way the inner war would swing. Then, with a curse, Brett hurled the brick away and rose. Leaving the half-stunned Danny to recover, he pushed his way through the fence and, walking like an automaton, made his way back to the restaurant where his Aston Martin was parked. As he slid into the driver's seat, his face was expressionless. 'Hello, doctor.'

Fowler, who was occupying the. passenger seat, looked almost exultant with satisfaction. 'I'm pleased with you. Very, very pleased.'

Brett's voice was toneless. 'Is there anything more tonight?'

‘ No. You can go home and get some rest. You've surpassed my highest expectations.' Fowler jumped from the Aston Martin and glanced back before closing the door. 'I'll be in touch with you Wednesday. That's the big day. Goodnight.'

He stood a moment watching the Aston Martin pull away. Then he walked back to the black Ford which was parked in a small cul-de-sac beside the restaurant. Sally Crane at the wheel gave him an anxious glance as he slid in alongside her. 'All right?'

'Everything perfect,' Fowler assured her.

The girl indicated the restaurant. 'I think Wilde recognized you in there.'

Fowler gave thought to her words for a moment, then shrugged. 'I doubt it. He only saw me for an instant. And my face wouldn't mean a thing to him.'

The girl looked less convinced but did not pursue the subject. 'Where now?' she asked, reaching for the starter.

Fowler pulled out his hip flask and settled comfortably back in his seat. 'Somewhere where there's a telephone. Then we can relax for the night.'

The music from the hi-fi speakers in the luxurious apartment was low and restful. A half-empty bottle of whisky stood on a table with a glass and a man's magazine alongside it. As the last record on the auto player ran out, Brett emerged from his bedroom. Wearing a towelled dressing gown, he had clearly been taking a bath or shower. Looking relaxed he walked towards the hi-fi, selected another half-dozen records, and dropped them into place. As the music started again he poured himself a drink and picked up the magazine. His every movement was that of an untroubled man going through a pre-bedtime routine.

Glass and magazine in hand, he was moving back to the bedroom when the doorbell sounded. Looking a little surprised he crossed the room and drew back the latch. The door was immediately pushed open and a grim-faced Danny entered. Although he had cleaned up from the fight and changed his clothes, a large dark bruise showed on his cheekbone.

His calling at Brett's apartment at odd hours was a common occurrence and Brett's reaction showed it. 'I thought you had a date. Didn't she show up?'

As Danny stood staling at him the Englishman walked back to the table, his tone bantering. 'Or did she walk out on you? Well, don't worry about it. One of these days you'll find yourself a nice short-sighted girl who won't care how you look.' He picked up the bottle. TLike a drink?'

Danny did not answer. Turning, Brett saw his face and his tone changed. What's wrong?'

Danny's voice was hoarse. "What's wrong? You nearly kill me and you ask what's wrong!'

The Englishman's eyes widened. 'Kill you!'

'Right.' Danny pointed grimly at the huge bruise on his cheek. 'That's part of it. A small part.'

Brett sank into a chair. Warily, Danny drew closer. 'You're saying you don't remember?'

Brett, very pale again, lifted shocked eyes. 'I haven't an idea in the world what you're talking about. And that's the truth.'

'You don't remember meeting me in the restaurant and leaving just before I brought my girl over to you?'

'No.'

'But you must remember! I came after you and you jumped me in a building site. You tried to kill me with a shovel, an iron pipe, and then with a brick. How does anyone forget that?'

Brett's expression was a mixture of horror and disbelief. 'But why would I want to do that to you?'

'That's what I want to know. But it was you. No one else fights that hard.'

Brett closed his eyes as if shutting out a nightmare. 'I tried to kill you? ... Tonight?'

In spite of himself Danny was now beginning to show sympathy. 'You'll have to try another doctor, pal. There's *got* to be something wrong.'

Brett suddenly straightened in his chair. 'I can prove it wasn't me! You didn't tell me where you were going tonight.'

'Don't give me that. I asked you to come along.'

'Yes; but you didn't say where.'

It was Danny's turn to look bewildered. 'You're right. I didn't call Annabelle until I left your apartment.'

You see - I'm right. They've created my double.'

Danny gave a groan. 'Pal, it was you. Even to the way you slung your punches.'

I'm not talking about just a likeness. I mean a perfect, flawless copy.'

' But who could do that? It's impossible and you know it.'

Brett shook his head slowly but convincingly. 'I'm certain someone's done it. They must have. I haven't been out of the apartment the whole evening.'

Danny was watching him closely. 'You're certain of that?'

'Absolutely certain.' The Englishman indicated his robe. ' I changed into this just after you left, read for a while and then had a shower. That's all.'

There was a long silence, broken by Danny's sigh. 'All right. Let's leave it there for the moment. I'll go back and bathe my bruises and be round first thing in the morning. Maybe a night's sleep will sharpen us up and give us a new line.'

Brett nodded and Danny moved somewhat painfully towards the door. As he reached it the Englishman's voice checked him. 'Sorry for the hiding I didn't give you, Daniel.'

Danny turned ruefully. *'You're sorry.'* His grin came wickedly. You know something, pal? That's the one thing that makes me go for this double idea. You I could always take, but this guy was really tough.'

Brett grabbed the whisky bottle and pretended to throw it. Danny's laugh echoed back as he fled down the stairs.

Brett stirred restlessly in his sleep. A bright spot had appeared in the void in which he was floating and was turning into the face of Sam Milford. Before he could address the smiling man, the vision dissolved into a cluster of impossibly bright lights. As he tried to shield his eyes from them Brett heard the echoing sound of pistol shots. The lights dimmed and against a background of trees he saw the figures of Scott Maskell and Miss Lindsay towering over him. They closed towards one another, blurred, and then turned into the portly figure of Dr Fowler. He was talking but his words had no apparent meaning for the sleeping man. More bright lights took the doctor's place and flashing among them at almost subliminal speed Brett kept seeing

the face of Sam Milford. A bell began ringing insistently in some cavern of his mind and grew louder until the face and lights fragmented and vanished.

Dazed from his nightmare Brett took a few seconds to realize he had fallen asleep in his armchair and that the light streaming into the window was morning sunlight. His neck was stiff from his uncomfortable position and as he felt it gingerly the bell began ringing again. Realizing it was his doorbell he rose stiffly and crossed the room.

Opening the door he discovered a telegraph boy standing in the corridor. Taking an envelope from him Brett fumbled in the pocket of his dressing gown, only to find he had no change. As he went into his bedroom he threw the unopened cable on the table alongside the bottle of whisky. Handing the telegraph boy a tip, he closed the door and winced as he raised a hand to his head. Deciding a cold shower and black coffee were called for, he made towards his bedroom again. The cable lay unopened and forgotten on the table.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Scott Maskell replaced the telephone and nodded contentedly at the portrait of Sam Milford. 'You'll be glad to know we haven't risen early for nothing. He's on his way. He should be in London' - Maskell consulted his expensive wristwatch - 'in just about three hours.'

Unlike the impeccable Maskell, Fowler looked the worse for his early morning rendezvous. 'We're ready/ he muttered.

Maskell's glance was faintly disparaging. 'My dear chap, after six months' preparation I'd be exceedingly disappointed if you weren't.'

He crossed the penthouse suite to a built-in cupboard and began removing his jacket. His behaviour brought no reaction from Fowler who made for a breakfast tray and poured himself a black coffee. He took a sip, then turned curiously towards Maskell. 'What will you do with your share?'

Maskell smiled. 'I shall invest, dear boy. Shrewd cautious investments in women, wine, fast cars, and luxury yachts. The rest I shall no doubt squander.'

Fowler downed his coffee with a certain satisfaction. "We're all tarred with the same brush, aren't we?' he grunted. 'There was a time when I was a remarkably good doctor, you know. I had a bright future until I was tempted to experiment outside the boundaries of medical ethics for money.'

Down to his shirt, Maskell stripped it off and tossed it on a chair. The fact we recognize and admit to our weaknesses is our strength. What was it Oscar Wilde said? "I can resist everything but temptation."'

Reaching into the cupboard he pulled out a bullet-proof vest. He examined it carefully before strapping it on. It was Fowler's turn to look disparaging. 'You don't take any chances, do you? I don't know what you're worrying about. He won't be shooting at you.'

Maskell gave his imperturbable smile. 'My dear chap; one of my most engaging qualities is my extreme cowardice. When bullets start to fly I like all the protection I can get.'

Fowler took a glance at his watch and drained his cup. 'I'd better get moving.' He hesitated, then held out his hand to Maskell. 'Good luck.'

Maskell raised an eyebrow. "Luck? I hope we've eliminated all need of that.' He watched Fowler cross to the door, then gave an amused laugh. ‘ Haven't you forgotten something?'

Fowler turned to see Maskell pointing a pistol at him. As his florid face paled, Maskell gave another laugh and switched the gun in his hand so he was holding the barrel.

T)on't make any more mistakes, will you?' he said, pushing the pistol at the shaken man.

Brett was having his breakfast on a tray in the living room when Danny arrived. Still in his dressing gown, he drew a quip from the nattily-dressed American. ‘ E1 Lordo is slipping! There was a time I thought he slept in his dress suit.' Approaching closer, he peered into Brett's face. ‘ Eyes like coal sacks! Where did you sleep last night?'

Brett indicated the armchair. *1* know better ways of spending a night.' He pushed the tray towards the American. 'For that matter I've seen you look in better shape.'

Fingering his darkened cheek, Danny poured himself a coffee. 1 spent one half the night nursing my bruises and the other half wondering who that guy was who jumped me.' He lifted his cup, took a sip, and grimaced. "Now I know.'

Brett stared at him. Tfou do?'

Danny was grinning. Tfeah. It *was* your double. Nobody but the real Brett Sinclair could make coffee as bad as this.'

Brett relaxed. *1* thought I'd improved.'

Tfou have, pal, you have. Now it's only disgusting.'

The mood of both men changed in the short silence that followed. Danny was the first to break it. 'I really did put in a lot of homework last night. And the thing that hit me was that a plastic surgery job is a pretty big deal.’

Brett nodded. *1* know that.'

'It's one thing to do a face job, although even that takes time. But to coach a guy into mannerisms - to get the voice right, the walk, the gestures - that could take months.'

Brett's expression was beginning to tighten again. 'So?'

'So, for that much trouble, the reason has to be something big. Like enormous, I mean.'

Brett's face cleared. 'I had the same thought before I fell asleep in that chair. And all that happened was my ego got hurt.'

•Ego?'

Tes. There's nothing in my life that's worth a tenth of all that trouble.'

Danny's eyes twinkled wickedly. 'Oh, come on. There's ... I mean you ...' Pretending to think hard he sighed and made a gesture of defeat. 'Come to think of it, you're right. Nobody in their right mind would want to be you.'

For once Brett did not respond to his banter. 'Money, titles, houses, estates,' he muttered. They're all so tied up in trusts that even I can't get at them.'

Danny dropped his light-hearted facade. 'There's got to be something, pal.' As he pushed back the breakfast tray he noticed the unopened cable. 'Cables are usually urgent, aren't they? Aren't you going to read it?'

Shaking his head at his forgetfulness, Brett tore open the envelope. 'It's from Sam Milford,' he told Danny. 'He arrives in town today and would like to see us.'

He passed the cable to Danny and then, with an exclamation, snatched it back again. Danny stared at his suddenly animated face.

'What is it?'

Brett's fist came down on the table. 'Sam Milford! That's it. That's why they need a double.'

Danny lifted a restraining hand. 'Slow it down a bit, I'm not with you.'

Brett leaned forward excitedly. 'Think! Tell me exactly what you know about Sam Milford.'

Danny shrugged. 'I know he's probably the richest shipowner in the world.'

'Right. Go on.'

1 know that five or six years ago he was a swinger - a big time gambler - right in the middle of all the social action. Then he closed up like a clam and no one saw him any more.'

'Do you know why?'

' No idea.'

Then I'll tell you. Six years ago there were three attempts on his life in as many months. And another one the year after. That was enough for Sam. Since then he has never moved without a phalanx of bodyguards.'

'And that's the reason he's so hard to see?'

'Right. His homes, his offices, every place he owns or uses is like a bank vault. He's better protected than Fort Knox.'

'And you're the one guy who can get in to see him at any time,' Danny said slowly.

Relief at solving the mystery brought an excited laugh from Brett. 'That's it. Sam Milford's one of my oldest friends. All his guards know me. *That's* what's so special about my face. It's an unquestioned passport to Sam Mil-ford.'

His enthusiasm had infected Danny who was already on his feet and ready for action. 'That's got to be it. Someone wants him dead.'

Brett ran towards his bedroom, slipping out of his robe on the way. Try to get him on the telephone. His number's there somewhere. We've got to move fast.'

The gleaming Rolls-Royce moved sedately but powerfully through the London traffic. In the rear seat a handsome man in his sixties with silver hair was studying a sheaf of documents. A dark-suited young man named Brody sat beside him. University trained, with an academic face and longish hair, Brody could have been mistaken for a private secretary had his alert eyes and quick movements not betrayed he played a less passive role in Sam Milford's affairs. A companion bodyguard, also wearing a dark suit, sat in the front passenger seat beside a chauffeur who, for all his peaked cap and white coat, looked a lean and formidable character. Even when on the move in his bullet-proof car, Sam Milford took few chances.

The Rolls glided into the forecourt of a gleaming office skyscraper. Almost before its wheels stopped turning the two dark-suited men were outside and surveying the precincts and office windows nearby. Satisfied, they opened the rear door of the Rolls, positioning themselves in such a way that Milford was an almost impossible target. With the chauffeur in front of the tycoon, the party hurried up the steps into the building's foyer. Crossing the marble floor, with its banks of flowers, they ignored the main lifts, making instead for a pair of closed doors on the right-hand side of the lobby marked PRIVATE ELEVATOR

Two more bodyguards were stationed outside it. The older of the two, dark-suited with a shock of blond hair, saluted Milford and pressed the operating button. As the doors slid open Milford's *two* personal bodyguards stood back for the tycoon to enter first, then closed in behind him. The chauffeur remained in the lobby. As the elevator whined upwards Milford turned to the youthful Brody.

"How many men in the lobby?'

Three including Jackson, sir."

'And in my office?'

With us there'll be another three.'

Milford nodded. "That should cover it.'

The lift came to a halt and the doors slid open. Taking a precautionary glance outside, the two men flanked Mil-ford and led him down a spotless corridor to a small office. A guard inside the office came to attention on seeing Mil-ford, then picked up a telephone. A moment later a door behind him opened. Brody stepped through the door, then stood aside for the tycoon to enter.

The silver-haired Milford walked forward. Across the luxurious penthouse office that opened out before him, his portrait stared at him benignly. An impeccably-dressed colleague was waiting in the centre of the room to greet him and Sam Milford's voice expressed his pleasure. 'Hi, Scott, You're looking welL'

His cultured voice warm with friendship, Scott Maskell came forward with outstretched hand. "Hello, Sam. How good to see you again. Welcome back to London.'

Brett gave an urgent shout from his bedroom. "Haven't you found his number yet?'

Danny was fumbling through a telephone pad. 'All I can find here are girls' addresses. Milly, Mary, Marion ... Why don't you keep your birds and your business friends separate?'

Brett, who had climbed into a pair of slacks but whose shirt was still flapping loose, came hurrying out. 'I'm sure it's in there. Give it to me ...' He paused at Danny's expression. "What's the matter?'

The American was staring at his left forearm from which the loose sleeve had fallen back. A heavy bruise and a severe abrasion covered it halfway from elbow to wrist. Slowly Danny laid the pad down alongside the telephone. 'When did you do that?' he asked hoarsely.

Brett looked slightly mystified himself as he stared down at the abrasion. 'I don't know.'

Without warning Danny grabbed the Englishman's arm and lifted it to inspect the wound more closely. 'When?' he asked grimly.

His insistence made Brett frown. 'I've told you I don't know. I suppose it must have happened when I was at that house. But why the drama?'

Releasing his arm, Danny stepped back. He looked as tighdy wound as a coiled spring. 'I'll tell you why the drama. Forget about the double - there isn't one. The man I fought last night was you. Which means you're the one who's primed to kill Sam Milford I'

The silence in the room was hke a drawn breath. Brett had gone white to the lips. TTou're out of your mind,' he muttered.

Danny shook his head violendy. ‘ No. It all fits now. They held you for seven days in that house. That was all the time they needed.'

Brett felt for an armchair and sank limply into it. To condition me? To brainwash me? Is that what you believe?'

"What else can anyone believe?' the American demanded. 'My bet is that you've been programmed to carry out a pre-set sequence of actions - the main one being to kill Sam Milford'

A shudder ran through the Englishman. 'It's impossible. I'd have to be left with some memory of it.'

Danny was prowling round the room now like a bloodhound hot on a scent. "Listen; they've come a long way since Pavlov and his dogs. The techniques are pretty sophisticated - hypnotic drugs - auto suggestion - mind implants ... After the right treatment you can be keyed into doing almost anything they want.'

Brett's voice rose in protest. 'All right, all right. Assume it's true. It still doesn't explain why I should attack you last night.'

"Why not?' Danny demanded. 'Probably it was some kind of test.'

You mean if I could be made to come near to killing you, I was functioning as they planned?'

That's how I see it.'

'But I don't even remember it!'

That's how it works. There's probably a key phrase or word ... When you hear it, it acts like a switch - you do or say anything they tell you. When the job's done, another key word turns you off and the memory is erased.'

Brett gave an exclamation of distress and jumped to his feet. "You make it sound as if I were a kind of human hand grenade. Someone has only to pull out the pin and off I go!'

Danny showed bis sympathy. 'One thing is sure - you've got to stay away from Sam Milford. In fact until we get some expert advice you'd better stay away from everybody.'

Brett stared at him. 'Why everybody?'

"Because the pin can't be pulled until someone delivers that trigger word. And our job is to make sure they can't deliver it.'

Convinced at last, Brett moved towards the telephone. Til phone Dr Gordon and ask him to come round.'

As he reached the table the telephone began to ring. Without thinking Brett reached out for it. Before he could lift the receiver Danny's hand slammed down on his wrist and held it. Understanding, Bree drew sharply away. With both men watching it as if it were a threatening ratdesnake, the telephone rang and rang.

The black Ford was parked near the telephone booth opposite Brett's apartment. Sally Crane was behind the wheel and as Fowler glanced at his watch she turned to him. "How much longer?'

The doctor looked both excited and confident. 'Another three minutes.'

"But what if someone goes into the phone box.'

Fowler heaved himself out of his seat. 'It wouldn't matter if we were a few minutes late - Maskell will keep him there. But perhaps you're right. I'll wait inside.'

The girl watched him cross the pavement and enter the kiosk. There was no sign of Danny's red Ferrari among the cars that lined the opposite side of the street. Unable to find a gap, the American had parked in the basement garage.

The seconds ticked past. Two women shoppers, pausing outside the kiosk to exchange pleasantries, momentarily blocked the girl's view of Fowler. When they moved on she saw he had the receiver in his hand and was dialling. Instinctively her eyes turned to the sunlit windows of Brett's apartment but she could see no movement there. Her fingers drummed nervously on the wheel as she waited.

It was three minutes before Fowler returned. His earlier confidence was replaced by a frown. 'He's not answering.'

The girl showed her concern. 'That shouldn't happen, should it?'

Fowler shook his head. Deliberating a moment he leaned in through the open window. 'Give me the gun.'

'What are you going to do?'

Fowler held out his hand. 'I'm going up to him.'

Opening the glove locker the girl pulled out an automatic pistol. Glancing around him Fowler snatched it and tucked it into his side pocket. 'Wait here,' he said curtly. Without another word he crossed the street and vanished through the apartment entrance.

Brett, looking edgy and ill at ease, wandered over to his hi-fi and began thumbing through the records. His expression showed his mind was on anything but music. 'Maybe I should go out of town for a while,' he muttered.

Danny, sprawled out in an armchair, gave a disparaging yawn. "You think they won't be watching out for you?'

Brett turned on him resentfully. Tm not going to stay cooped up here for the rest of my life.'

'You know how long you've been cooped up? Fifteen minutes. You'd be great on a desert island.'

'But I'm not on a desert island. I'm in the middle of London. With things to do and people to see.'

'Now look,' Danny said patiently. The cable says Milford will be leaving town tomorrow morning. So you've only twenty-four hours and then you can bust loose. I'll tell you what - get some cards and well play gin.'

You always cheat at gin.'

Danny grinned. "Well naturally. How else could I win all the time? Get the cards.'

Brett nodded and walked disconsolately towards bis bedroom. As he disappeared the doorbell rang. Reacting sharply, Danny leapt to his feet and cast an anxious glance at the bedroom. 'Stay inside and dose the door,' he called.

He cautiously crossed the room towards the apartment entrance. He reached out quietly for the latch and as the bell rang again he snatched the door open, to find himself face to face with Fowler. Recognition on both sides was immediate. As Fowler went for his pistol, Danny grabbed him by the lapels of his tweed suit and yanked him forward. The attack hampered the doctor and a jolting punch from Danny sent him sprawling on the carpet. There he managed to pull out the pistol but before he could level it Danny dived forward and knocked it from his hand. Fowler scrambled to his feet and the two men exchanged blows for a moment but the bulky doctor was no match for the American. Sinking a fist into his stomach Danny went in for the knock-out. As Fowler doubled up the American heard him gasp three words: 'Sanlucar de Barrameda.' A second later an uppercut straightened Fowler, followed by a punch that stretched him unconscious on the floor.

Panting and rubbing his knuckles, Danny stood back. That's the guy who

followed me in the black Ford. And who was in the bar last night...'

Hearing no sound from Brett he turned and froze. The Englishman, his face distorted beyond recognition, had picked up the pistol and was moving menacingly towards him. Horrified, Danny backed away but before he could attempt to defend himself the pistol swung brutally down and dropped him in a heap on the carpet.

With his expression making it clear he was ready to strike again if necessary, Brett knelt over him. Discovering the American was unconscious he went back into the bedroom for his jacket. His last act was to remove the clip from the automatic and check it with cold efficiency. Then, glancing back at the two unconscious men, he slipped out of the apartment.

A minute later the girl in the black Ford saw a bronze Aston Martin sweep up the ramp of the basement garage and turn down the street. As the car passed her she had a momentary glimpse of Brett's face. The sight sent a chill of anticipation through her. It was like the face of a zombie, single-minded in its deadly purpose.

The flood of cold water started Fowler spluttering and coughing. Danny was standing over him with an empty flower vase in his hand. Although still groggy himself, the American looked grim and determined as he bent down and slapped the doctor's face. 'Sit up! You're not that bad.' The dazed Fowler tried to push him away. Danny, showing no intention of being gentle, grabbed his shoulders and shook him fiercely. You've conditioned Brett to kill Sam Milford, haven't you?' When Fowler did not answer Danny gave him a backhand slap that echoed around the room. 'Haven't you?'

Fowler wiped a smear of blood from the corner of his mouth. His eyes had a vindictive gleam as he gazed up at the American. 'You can't stop it now. No matter what you do.'

‘How does it work?' Danny demanded. When he received no answer he delivered two more stinging slaps to the man's face, then, grabbing his shoulders, threw him back hard into a chair. His face, jutting only inches from the doctor's, left no doubt of his intentions should the man not cooperate.

1 said talk 1 Tell me how it works.'

Although Fowler was clearly afraid of the American, the sudden collapse of his resistance suggested he was certain the information was useless. Sullen, he wiped his bleeding mouth again before answering.

Trom this moment on, Sinclair is keyed into a behaviour pattern. He'll act perfectly normally until another trigger word is used and then he'll draw the gun and fire. He'll have no control over this action whatsoever.'

That routine he went through with me last night - that fight - was that the same thing?'

'Similar, yes.'

'But when it was over you turned him off. Wiped out any memory of it. How?'

There is an eraser word,' Fowler told him.

Danny's hand tightened on the man's lapels. "What word?'

The man's eyes betrayed his triumph. 'It won't work this time. He's mentally compelled to go through a course of actions that only he can end.'

'You mean something that will bring him back to normal?'

Tes.'

Danny shook the man ferociously. 'I want that eraser word. And you'd better not he.'

This time there isn't one. It's a sound.'

'All right. What sound?'

Although Danny's grip was half-choking him, Fowler's triumph spilled out into a grin. 'You're wasting your time. It's something you can't stop. The sound of the gunshots when he kills Milfordl'

Goaded by the man's smile and his own sense of helplessness, Danny's anger exploded in a blow to the doctor's jaw. As Fowler slumped back unconscious, the American turned and ran towards the door.

CHAPTER NINE

The bronze Aston Martin swung into the forecourt of the huge office block and parked outside its glass-panelled doors. Brett, looking composed and in every way his urbane self, smiled at the uniformed commissioner who met him inside the flower-decked lobby.

'Good morning. I've an appointment with Mr Sam Mil-ford.'

The commissioner threw a warning glance at the two dark-suited men standing beside the private lift. As Brett approached them, the blond bodyguard relaxed and muttered something to his colleague. He turned to Brett with a smile. "Lord Sinclair. If s nice to see you again.'

Brett's response was pleasant and uncondescending. 'Hello, Cosway. How's your wife?'

Tine, sir. We had our first baby last week.'

You had? A boy or a girl?'

'A boy. The wife's pleased - she'd always wanted a son.'

'Congratulations to both of you.' Brett indicated the lift. 'May I go up? Mr Milford is expecting me.'

Yes, sir. He told us you'd be coming.' Standing aside the man let Brett into the lift. It whined upwards, its doors sliding back on the gleaming corridor that led to the penthouse. Looking completely relaxed Brett entered the small office where two of Milford's bodyguards were stationed. Recognizing him, one of them announced his arrival on the telephone. The penthouse door opened almost immediately to allow Brett to enter.

His eyes were taken up with the sight of Sam Milford, beaming broadly and approaching him. 'Brett I Good to see you. It's been too long.'

The two men shook hands with the warmth of old friends. Brett's laugh reflected his pleasure. 'You look marvellous, Sam. I don't know how you do it.'

Sam Milford clapped his arm affectionately. 'You're not exactly falling to pieces yourself.' He drew Brett across the luxurious office. 'Come on - let's sit down and talk. I've got a million things I want to ask you. And a couple of things to tell you.'

The mischievous note in his voice made Brett halt. ‘ Like what?'

Milford's grin was like that of a schoolboy unable to keep a secret. 'Brett, I intended to play it cool but I can't. I'm too excited.'

His almost childlike eagerness made Brett smile. 'Come on then. Don't keep me in suspense.'

You won't be ready for this, so hold on. I've got myself married.'

Brett gave a start of surprise. Then, seizing Milford's hand, he gripped it warmly. 'Sam, this is terrific! The last of the natural bachelors gets hooked. She must be really something.’

'She is,' the beaming tycoon told him.

'When do I meet her?'

Milford gave a chuckle. TTou meet her now.' Turning, he drew Brett's attention to the cluster of chairs that marked the social area of the office. The bodyguard, Brody, was stationed near the door. Scott Maskell, discreet but attentive, was standing near the drinks cabinet, his smile expressing his appreciation of the two friends' reunion. But Brett's eyes were on the high-backed swivel chair that was slowly turning towards him. A pair of slim legs appeared, then the shapely figure of 'Miss Lindsay'. Blonde, elegant, lovely, she rose and came towards him with one slim arm outstretched. Tfello, Lord Sinclair,' she murmured. 'Or may I call you Brett? Sam has told me so much about you. I think you must be the only man in the world he really trusts.'

Danny's red Ferrari was jinking through the traffic like a tearaway halfback making for the line. A police car gave chase but was unable to keep contact. Two minutes later the powerful car swung into the Milford office forecourt, scorched rubber blackening the road as it screeched to a halt.

Danny'shot up the steps and through the glass panelled entrance as if catapulted out by the violence of the stop. Pushing aside the commissioner he ran towards the two men guarding the private lift. 'I've got to see Sam Milford,' he panted.

Cosway's voice was polite but expressionless. 'Your name, sir.'

'It won't help. He's not expecting me.'

The two guards exchanged glances. 'Then he won't see you,' Cosway said.

"You don't understand. It's a matter of life or death. You can come up with me if you like. Only I must see him.'

'Sorry, sir. It's out of the question.’

With his petition a failure Danny went into action. Shoving between the two

guards he pressed the lift button. As the doors slid open Cosway grabbed his shoulder, all politeness gone. 'I said you couldn't see him.'

Danny tore himself free. Blocking Cosway's karate chop he threw a counterpunch that made the man sag at the knees. The younger guard jumped back and tried to draw his pistol but Danny was too quick. Kicking the pistol from his hand he grabbed him and hurled him at Cosway. As both men stumbled, the American jumped into the lift and pressed the ascent button. Cosway made a desperate attempt to stop the doors closing but was inches too late. As the lift shot upwards he turned and ran for the telephone.

Brett, Sam Milford and his wife were in an amicable cluster in the middle of the penthouse office. The Englishman, showing no recognition of the girl, was smiling warmly at Milford. "When did all this happen, Sam?'

Milford, his arm round the girl's waist, hugged her affectionately. 'Five months ago. We had a honeymoon in Trinidad. Then I had to go back to the States.'

The blonde girl gave Brett a rueful smile. 'In all that time we've only had two months together. I came back here to London.'

Brett gave another laugh of pleasure. 'I think it's a moment to celebrate, don't you? Haven't you got something special for the occasion, Sam?'

Milford turned to the smiling Maskell. 'There's the expert on fancy booze. You got anything special for us, Scott?'

Maskell came to life. 'As a matter of fact, I have. It's something I'd like your opinion on, Lord Sinclair.'

Brett lifted an amused eyebrow. 'Be glad to.'

Maskell's eyes were fixed on his face. 'It's a sherry,' he said. 'Something rather unique.'

Brett's eyelids began to nicker as if suddenly afflicted by a nervous tic. The girl, tightening up, began to move away from the unsuspecting Milford. Turning towards the drinks cabinet Maskell selected a bottle. It's from a small Spanish bodega. The vineyard's only a few acres and we take the entire supply. As far as I know it's the only wine still shipped in amphora.'

Brett's eyelids were now flickering uncontrollably. They had drawn Milford's attention, and as the Englishman lifted a hand to his temple, the tycoon showed his concern. 'What's wrong, Brett?'

Before Brett could react to the question Maskell turned to face the small group again. Wine bottle in hand he took a couple of steps forward as if displaying it to Brett. He spoke slowly, with precise enunciation.

They named it after the local village. It's called Sanlucar de Barrameda!'

One of the guards in the outer office was showing alarm as he listened to the urgent voice of Cosway on the telephone. Slamming the receiver down he turned urgently towards his colleague. There's an intruder. He's broken through and is on his way upstairs...'

Before the second guard could answer the outer door burst open and Danny came in like a runaway tank. As the men tried to draw their pistols, the American dropped one with a perfect left hook. The other he grabbed by the arm and catapulted across the office where he crashed against the wall and slid down half-stunned. Spinning round Danny threw open the penthouse door.

The scene before him was like a film set. Brett, whose face had turned expressionless on hearing the key words, had drawn the pistol and was pointing it at Milford. The tycoon, unable to decide whether he was witnessing a sick joke or whether his life really was threatened, was backing away. Giving a cracked laugh, he extended a hand in protest. 'Stop kidding, Brett. You know how I feel about guns.'

A second later the scene exploded. Brody, distracted by Danny's violent intrusion and believing him the potential assassin, launched himself forward. With only split-seconds to work in Danny dropped on his knees, caught the man's legs, and pitched him over his head. In almost the same movement he flung himself at Brett in a desperate tackle.

Hit at the very moment he was about to fire, Brett crashed into a chair and dropped the pistol. At the same moment the two guards from the outer office rushed in and flung themselves at Danny. Just in time Danny snatched Brett's pistol from the carpet and levelled it.

As the two men halted, assistance came to them from an unexpected quarter. Brett, his handsome face contorted, picked himself up and advanced on the American. From his expression and the compulsion of his movements it might have been a toy pistol Danny held in his hand.

The American backed away. Across the room Maskell, dismayed by the success of Danny's intervention, was showing fresh hope as the robotlike Brett closed on Danny. Unable to shoot, the American retreated until his back was against a glass cabinet. It was only when Brett, less than two yards away, was about to launch himself forward that the shaken Danny remembered Fowler's words. Pointing the pistol at the floor he fired three rapid shots.

The effect on Brett was electric. Halting dead in his tracks he gazed round the office as if seeing it for the first time. As his eyes settled on Maskell he gave a violent start. 'You!' he said thickly.

His stare moved to Milford's wife who had turned deathly pale. 'And you!' Brett muttered. 'You were the girl in the woodI'

Seeing Milford's bewilderment, Danny pushed forward. 'They planned this between them. They captured Brett and brainwashed him into killing you before witnesses so they would appear innocent. As you see, they nearly pulled it off.'

The girl was the first to crack. Giving a cry of distress she ran for the door. It was an act that broke the paralysis that was gripping Milford. He snapped an order and the guards seized her.

It was the distraction Maskell had been hoping for. His hand leapt inside his jacket and came out with a pistoL Expecting the move Danny jumped forward

and knocked the gun away. Maskell fought him like a wild animal but he was no match for the enraged American who had nearly witnessed the destruction of his friend. Grunting his satisfaction, Danny sank a fist into his stomach and then stretched him half-unconscious across an armchair.

As he moved in to finish the job Milford intervened. Realization that Maskell, a close colleague, had planned his death in collaboration with the woman he loved seemed for the moment to have turned his mind. Moving fast for his age, he snatched up the pistol and stood over the armchair, the gun aimed at the man's head. Maskell shrank back as his finger tightened on the trigger.

Brett showed his alarm as he moved forward. 'Don't, Sam,' he begged. T.et the law take care of them.'

For endless seconds it seemed the outraged Milford would take his own revenge. Then, shivering with the effort, he tossed the pistol at Brett and turned for the door. On the way he passed his captive wife. His glance made her turn away as if her face had been struck. A moment later the door closed behind him.

The couples on the maple floor of the restaurant were dancing with some abandon. The rest were seated at tables served by attentive waiters. Discreet lighting brought out the sheen on lovely women's hair. The popping of champagne corks punctuated the laughter and hum of conversation. The atmosphere was youthful, gay, and expensive.

At one table dinner was over and a waiter was presenting the bill to Brett. Danny was seated opposite him, sharing the table with Annabelle and a beautiful brunette whose dark eyes seemed unable to leave Brett's handsome face.

"As the Englishman opened the bill, Danny gave a start. Brett's eyelids had started to twitch in a way only too familiar to the American. Danny's question had a note of hoarse concern.

"Hey, pal. You feeling all right?'

Brett had let the bill fall to the table. Watched by the fascinated waiter he rose stiffly and helped both the surprised girls from their chairs. As he stepped back his nervous tic ceased and his face turned expressionless as he took the girls' arms and steered them towards the door.

The alarmed Danny was now on his feet. As he started after the trio, Brett glanced back. A grin had replaced his robotlike expression and he gave the American a broad wink.

‘You know, it's an odd thing, Daniel, but I've got an irresistible compulsion not to pay that bill.' He turned back to the giggling girls. 'Shall we go, ladies?'

Danny's alarm turned to malevolence. You know something else - I ought to have left you a zombie. At least you used to pay your way in those days.'

Dropping notes on the waiter's plate he went after the trio. His scowl broke into a grin as Brett's hand clapped him across the shoulders. A moment later,

chatting and laughing, the two of them pushed open the glass doors and led the girls out into the neon-lit night life of London.

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